

Gunner's Seat

Thunderbolt 7 Tools for the Kit Bag: Competence, Trust and Communication

*"Trust is equal parts character and competence. ... You can look at any leadership failure, and it's always a failure of one or the other." -Stephen M.R. Covey, **The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything***

As Armor and Cavalry team members, we use the three developmental domains of leadership – institutional, operational and self-development – to enhance education, training and experience. For the purpose of this article, I want to focus on institutional leadership and how it applies to the operational and self-development aspects.

In the institutional domain, we focus on the foundations of learning and experience through professional military education (PME) and functional courses. Through these courses, you grow your military-occupational-specialty knowledge, applying additional special skillsets provided in course material to better yourself and your formations. The knowledge imparted to you from doctrine while attending these courses exemplifies the refined lessons-learned from battle-tested leaders over the past 247-year history of our Army. However, it is up to you to apply them.

Institutional leaders use military doctrine to establish a baseline of knowledge across all Army leaders. The foundations of doctrine and our PME teaching gives commanders and leaders reassurance that in the event there is an inability to communicate, you will understand how to apply experience and doctrine to continue and accomplish the mission. Vital to our mission as noncommissioned officers (NCOs), the NCO creed states, "I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders." The leader must know you will create a trusting environment among yourself, senior leaders and subordinates based on your competence and education.

Competence is our watchword. Competence is the ability to accomplish tasks in a timely manner with successful results. It is the embodiment of reliability to your Soldiers and senior leaders. We must always strive to uphold and increase our level of competence. Competence is the foundational requirement that enables trust. When combined with an upright character, your competence enables organizations to build mutual trust and communication to accomplish missions with superior results.

Effective organizational influence requires the application of competence and sound judgment of its leaders to build the trust needed for lethal organizations. Trust is the key to unit and leader success, but remember, blind trust is detrimental. True development of NCOs in the institutional domain must ensure they understand and apply the art and science of trust.

Part of this understanding must include teaching mechanisms that build prudence and sound judgment to encourage critical thinking and prevent the usage of the preverbal "easy button." NCOs who fully understand the "art and science" of inherent trust are valuable to our ability to continue to grow future leaders within the Armor force. Trust is developed and maintained by leaders who contribute to the well-being of Soldiers, their military expertise and to the Army.

Trust has a direct relationship on the time and resources required to accomplish the mission. We as leaders must develop and grow that trust within our Soldiers so that we maintain our positive relationship with the American people who rely on us to ethically, effectively and efficiently serve the nation.

Communication is another critical component of foundational leadership that enables trust. Communication contributes to trust by keeping others informed, establishing expectations, providing feedback and developing commitment. Lack of communication creates chaos throughout organizations and reduces productivity to compliance rather than commitment.

Poor communication fails to allow subordinates time to provide much needed bottom-up refinement. A continued lack of refinement continues to foster an organizational distrust because it prevents the communication necessary to complete the mission. This chaos becomes evident in safety failures, discipline incidents and training shortcomings.

Units that fully understand and operate within mission command demonstrate mastery of competence, trust and communication. These types of organizational leaders understand how the tools we have in our “leadership kit bag” are paramount to accomplishment of our mission and the welfare of our Soldiers. Remember, no one tool is greater than the other, but when used together, their combined effect is vital to mission success.

Competence, trust and communication are three of the most common after-action review comments either after an operation or in a command-climate survey. The foundations are built institutionally, but as lifelong learners, we must constantly strive to earn our subordinates’ and leaders’ trust while providing that inherent trust to our subordinates in our organizational actions and self-development.

Always communicate the Army profession as the best there is through your actions as competent leaders who can be trusted.¹

CSM LEVARES J. JACKSON SR.
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Endnotes

¹ Army Doctrinal Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, July 2019, referenced throughout for institutional, organizational and self-development discussion.

Acronym Quick-Scan

NCO – noncommissioned officer

PME – professional military education