

A Case for Company Commanders to Senior Rate Squad Leaders

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Across the Army, company commanders rely on the squad and its leader for mission accomplishment, but commanders are often relegated to supplementary reviewers in the rating process of squad leaders. This detachment is disjointed from the focus required to train and certify squad leaders. In fact, squad leader rating is incongruous with the way the Army manages every other echelon. Brigade and battalion commanders' rating schemes support and enhance their ability to effect the echelon two levels down. Realigning rating schemes to follow the Army's paradigm drives company commanders to participate in the development of junior NCOs. This change increases the ability to effectively integrate squad training to sustain or improve readiness, but it also builds "People First" teams.

Implementing the Change

The foremost critique of the proposed rating scheme is based on an assumption that company commanders do not have enough time to know each squad leader, conduct counselings, write evaluations, and lead the organization. Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System*, cautions against the senior rater from being too far separated from the rated Soldier. "When commanders, commandants, and organization leaders establish rating chains, they will ensure pooling of the rated population does not occur."¹ Hidden in this critique is the tacit assumption that there might be pooling involved. AR 623-3 defines pooling as

"elevating the rating chain beyond the senior rater's ability to have adequate knowledge of each Soldier's performance and potential, in order to provide an elevated assessment protection for a specific group."²

This critique holds weight, but if reviewed closely, commanders can utilize methods employed at higher echelons to ensure this perception is not founded. Much like a battalion commander who has a staff, subordinate commanders, and leaders to inform individual evaluations, the company commander must leverage the executive officer (XO), first sergeant (1SG), and platoon leadership to participate in the development and to make an accurate assessment of potential in the squad leader.

One might also say that this approach cuts the platoon sergeant out of the rating chain, but the senior NCO's role of advising and leading within the formation is unchanged. Critical input from the NCO support channel improves the individual Soldier's growth and maturation and ensures each rated staff sergeant receives a fair evaluation of performance and potential. While platoon sergeants will not sign the evaluations, they should not be pushed aside and uninvolved in rating decisions.

AR 623-3 provides fundamentals for establishing rating chains and clearly supports the proposed rating change.

A squad leader drills Soldiers during a rifle marksmanship range at the Bemowo Piskie Training Area in Poland.

Photo by CPT Evan Horner



“Established rating chains will correspond as nearly as practicable to the chain of command or supervision within a unit or organization, regardless of component or geographical location.”³ This guidance instructs commanders to follow the chain of command. Utilizing the chain of command, the squad leader should be rated by the platoon leader and senior rated by the commander. Another positive result is the commander has the rating population to give the deserving “most qualified” at the available 24 percent of the formation. Overall, the rating scheme is intended to ensure the best are selected for promotion and increased responsibility, and the commander and first sergeant have the best vantage point in a company to make decisions about squad leaders.



Photo by CPT Evan Horner

A squad competes in a combat physical fitness event to test readiness and build team cohesion.

Counseling

When senior rating squad leaders, a commander must plan and allocate adequate time for counseling and developing of each individual. A technique that can maximize interactions with the rated population is to counsel as an extension of physical training with squad leaders and their squads. This method increases the time a commander spends getting to know all of the squad leaders, along with an opportunity to interact with Soldiers in the squad. Using this model, a commander can counsel all squad leaders in three weeks without adding additional time infringing on daily duties.

This counseling technique also provides a commander the ability to maintain an accurate assessment of each squad as a team. The commander will understand who needs additional training and resources to manage their challenges. Most importantly, the additional counseling offers both the commander and squad leaders more opportunities to shape their working environment. A commander is able to individually discuss upcoming training or ask for organizational feedback. Squad leaders are able to understand how their squad fits into larger processes, seek mentorship, and ask for assistance.

While recurring counseling can be conducted in a near costless manner, a commander must spend additional time counseling at the end of the rating period. If counseling is conducted honestly and often, these evaluation counselings will not be difficult to fit into the routine. Consider making these discussions more formal to talk about the rating period, perception of performance, potential, future jobs, and feedback on organizational health.

Rating and Managing Performance

At all ranks, the senior rater has a huge impact on who is promoted and preparing junior leaders for increased responsibility. Placing junior leaders in environments that

provide them the best opportunity to succeed is not only great for the individual but also for the Army. A commander has served with many NCOs with different levels of capability, but leveraging the experience of senior NCOs in the company will lead to a clear understanding of those who are and are not excelling. The involvement of company leadership to include the platoon leader and platoon sergeant will not only help identify those ready for the next challenge but also to balance talent within the platoons.

These conversations can be reinforced during platoon leadership, XO, and the 1SG counseling. These discussions with platoon leaders and platoon sergeants can help them better communicate each squad leader's strengths, weaknesses, and career aspirations. As the squad leaders develop and progress, the need to have periodic candid conversations will inform and guide the follow-up counseling for the rated individuals. Platoon leaders and platoon sergeants will also receive feedback on the overall rating of their intermediate leaders and can assist in the training and mentorship to best serve the organization and individual.

The most important piece of these rating discussions is developing a plan for each staff sergeant. The 1SG and commander can utilize the rating discussions to build an NCO professional development program that meets the unit where it is and addresses the unique needs of individuals to prepare for upcoming training.

Leader Development and Certification

A focused NCO leader development program designed to prepare squad leaders to validate competencies to be successful on the battlefield is important, but it should also be organized to train them to become sergeants first class. Changing the rating scheme demonstrates the responsibility of a commander and the 1SG to develop squad leaders.

The increased focus and discussions about performance and potential directly shape the ability to understand gaps in knowledge. It also identifies which junior leaders need additional opportunities to grow or display potential. Consider utilizing observer-controller-trainer augmentation to give staff sergeants additional repetitions to learn from other organizations. A commander can set training goals to upcoming training events to create opportunities to improve. Clear guidance and intent in mission orders develop confidence to build cohesive teams, create shared understanding, and exercise disciplined initiative in training battle drills or planning events.

Squad leader certification is generally tied to situational training and live-fire exercises, but a commander can miss opportunities to certify other parts of squad leader duties. While tactical employment is critical to unit success, it is not the only skill squad leaders will require and is not an effective predictor of success at the next level. Effective verbal and written communication should be part of certifying junior NCOs. Examples are receiving and issuing an operation order, writing awards, and conducting evaluations. While initially time consuming, the investment will pay off with less administrative corrections, concise mission orders, and increased understanding of the commander's intent. These positive results are great for the organization, but this training and certification are parts of leader development that junior NCOs are owed.

While a commander can use many methods to develop and certify squad leaders, the additional time the 1SG and commander spend with staff sergeants is one of the greatest sources of development. The shared insights and one-on-one discussions are incredible opportunities for junior NCOs and demonstrate the command's commitment to the people they lead. Only then can the commander understand who

has potential, who needs more opportunities, and who needs special attention.

Conclusion

After reviewing AR 623-3 and analyzing the counter points, commanders should consider changing their rating schemes to senior rate squad leaders. This change will effectively impact the organization at the squad level. As the squad leaders and the commander build relationships, these junior NCOs will develop increased trust to train their squads. Commanders will also be able to better shape and lead their company from the insights gained from junior leaders.

The most important effect of the rating change is the additional effort 1SGs and commanders spend preparing squad leaders for their ultimate job. The Army has been focused on the ability to "fight tonight," and we all realize we will go to war with the team we have and not the one we want. Chief of Staff of the Army GEN James McConville stated, "Without our people, we're just a bunch of combat equipment sitting in motor pools, hangars, and arms rooms... It's the people that are going to allow us to win on the battlefield. It's the people that are going to allow us to have readiness and modernization and reform, and that's what we're committed to as we move forward."⁴

By spending the time and energy to train people, commanders can successfully develop increased trust that directly improves their ability to win on the battlefield. A new rating scheme doesn't change the responsibilities of a commander, but it provides additional opportunities to focus on people first with an end state on winning.

Notes

¹ Army Regulation (AR) 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System*, 14 June 2019, 8.

² *Ibid*, 2-2.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ Michelle Tan, "Putting People First: McConville Looks to Revolutionize How Soldiers Serve," Association of the United States Army, 3 October 2019. Accessed from <https://www.ausa.org/articles/putting-people-first-mcconville-looks-revolutionize-how-soldiers-serve>.

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A Soldier engages targets during a squad live-fire range at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany.

Photo by SSG Bradford Alex

