

# Strategy Research Project

## Developing Strategic Thinking in the NCO Corps of 2025

by

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### Abstract

Tactical decisions made by NCOs may have strategic implication, but the Army NCO Education System (NCOES) does not deliberately teach NCOs how to think strategically. To meet this challenge, the Army should educate NCOs how to “think strategically” throughout the NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS). This paper provides a definition and context for thinking strategically, examines the current deficit in educating and evaluating NCOs to think strategically, examines why the PME is the appropriate venue to most effectively educate Army NCOs to think strategically, analyzes the new NCOPDS, and makes recommendations on how to address this topic with the Army Professional Military Education system.

## **Developing Strategic Thinking in the NCO Corps of 2025**

One advantage we have, especially in times of decreasing budgets, derives from our ability to develop the right leaders -- non-commissioned officers, officers, and civilians -- who can think in this very complex world.

—General Raymond T. Odierno  
38th Chief of Staff of the Army

The Army Operating Concept (AOC) is the intellectual foundation for the Army's Force 2025 and Beyond (F2025B) process. F2025B introduces Army Warfighting Challenges (AWFCs), which are “enduring first order problems, the solutions to which improve the combat effectiveness of the current and future force.”<sup>1</sup> To address the educational framework for developing future leaders, AWFC #10 (Develop Agile and Adaptive Leaders) prioritizes the development of leaders capable of visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing operations in complex environments and against adaptive enemies. Reiterating the importance of AWFC #10, Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Daniel A. Dailey challenged Army leaders to “leverage experiences to prepare Soldiers and develop the future NCO corps to meet those challenges and succeed.”<sup>2</sup>

Tactical decisions made by Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) may have strategic implications, but the Army NCO Education System (NCOES) does not deliberately teach NCOs to think strategically – and the omission is not without cost. As Dr. Anna Sackett from the Army Research Institute (ARI) explains: “Without leaders who think strategically, resources are wasted - in some cases billions of dollars, months of time working the wrong problem or talking with the wrong people, developing the wrong talent, and most importantly the loss of Soldiers' lives.”<sup>3</sup>

SMA Daley recently wrote an article about the competence of future NCOs to explain why the Army should refine the education system to develop NCOs who thrive in ambiguity. He stated: “To achieve cognitive dominance and intellectual overmatch, we must redesign the Professional Military Education (PME) system. The uncertainty of tomorrow requires NCOs who are innovative, critical thinkers able to operate in ambiguity and thrive in chaos.”<sup>4</sup> To meet this challenge, the Army should educate NCOs how to “think strategically” throughout the NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS). This paper examines how the Army can develop strategic thinking in the NCO Corps of 2025. First, it provides a definition and context for thinking strategically and explains why the uncertainty of tomorrow requires NCOs with this skill. Second, it examines the current deficit in NCO education and evaluations and illustrates the fragmented framework of instruction within current NCO courses as well as how the new NCO evaluation report lacks emphasis on thinking strategically. Third, this paper explores if the NCO PME System is the appropriate and effective venue to educate Army NCOs to think strategically. Fourth, it analyzes how the new NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS) provides the best opportunity to address strategic thinking gaps within the NCO Corps. Finally, it provides counter-arguments and makes recommendations using a strategy development framework to guide improvement of PME to help educate Army NCOs to think strategically.

### Definition and Context for Thinking Strategically

Thinking strategically differs from strategic leadership and thinking at the strategic level. While there are many definitions of thinking strategically in doctrine and theory, for this paper, thinking strategically is how any leader thinks and understands the strategic impact that decisions may have at any level. Stephen Haines, founder and

Chief Executive Officer for the Centre for Strategic Management, defines thinking strategically as “a broader and more innovative way of thinking on a daily basis about the overall goals of a job, team, and organization.”<sup>5</sup> It is a way Army NCOs should conduct leadership business on a daily basis. In contrast, thinking at the strategic level refers to actions of strategic leaders solely at the strategic level. Strategic leadership includes senior military and civilian leaders at the major commands through Department of Defense levels. This implies a “structural level” of leadership because strategic leaders work in uncertain environments that present highly complex problems impacted by events and organizations outside the Army. Thinking at the strategic level connotes thinking on matters for the entire force, DOD, and with other nations.<sup>6</sup>

In her Army Research Institute (ARI) research on “Enhancing the Strategic Capability of the Army”, Dr. Anna Sacket conducted interviews with Army leaders of all ranks to determine the tasks that require them to think strategically. The outcome of her interviews confirmed: “It is important to note that strategic thinking does not only occur at strategic levels, but can also happen at tactical and operational levels.”<sup>7</sup> Her research supports the need to educate NCOs to think strategically early in and throughout a career. The cognitive component of thinking strategically is similar to what the Army Human Dimension Concept describes as “a key contributor to adaptability and supports learning, critical thinking, and rapid, effective decision making in the institutional and operational Army.”<sup>8</sup>

### Strategic Thinking Competencies

Strategic thinking requires a set of distinct leader competencies – the knowledge, skills, attributes and capacities that allow the leader to exercise strategic thinking. The Center for Strategic Leader Development (CSLD) at the Army War College, during a

series of workshops on the education of strategy, developed six competency definitions for officers (but not NCOs). Four of these competencies clearly define attributes also necessary for the NCO Corps: Comprehensively Gathers Information, is a Lifelong Learner, Thinks Critically, Thinks in Time.<sup>9</sup> Coincidentally, the 21st Century Soldier Competencies align with four of the six strategic thinking competencies as well.<sup>10</sup> The final two competencies in the listing below were derived from General Learning Objectives (GLOs) currently resident in PME Courses.<sup>11</sup>

**Comprehensive Information Gathering (CG).** A strategic thinker continually scans the environment, seeks information from disparate sources, suspends judgment and remains open minded, considers other perspectives, and possesses listening and research skills.

**Lifelong Learner (LL).** A strategic thinker is a lifelong learner who iteratively tests, reflects upon, conceptualizes, and manages knowledge to gain insights on the environment and continually examines one's own thinking.

**Critical Thinking (CT).** A strategic thinker identifies the essential aspects of a situation, questions assumptions, asks relevant questions, explains meaningful connections and distinctions, understands nuance, and considers the limits of data.

**Thinking in Time (TT).** A strategic thinker understands historical and contemporary contexts, recognizes patterns, forecasts possible futures, anticipates second and third order effects, and has a long-term perspective.<sup>12</sup>

**Solve Problems (SP).** Soldiers and leaders analyze and evaluate thinking, with a view to improving it. They solve complex problems by using experiences, training, education, critical questioning, convergent, critical, and creative thinking, and collaboration to develop solutions.<sup>13</sup>

**Cultural Competence (CC) in JIIM.** Soldiers and leaders use cultural fundamentals, self-awareness skills, and regional competence to act effectively in any situation. They use communication, including foreign language, influence, and relational skills to work effectively in varied cultural and joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational contexts.<sup>14</sup>

Figure-1 illustrates the relationships of the proposed strategic thinking competencies for NCOs. NCO PME serves as the base for the entire framework, an essential foundation if the Army wishes to educate NCOs how to think strategically in all PME courses and throughout every NCO's career path.

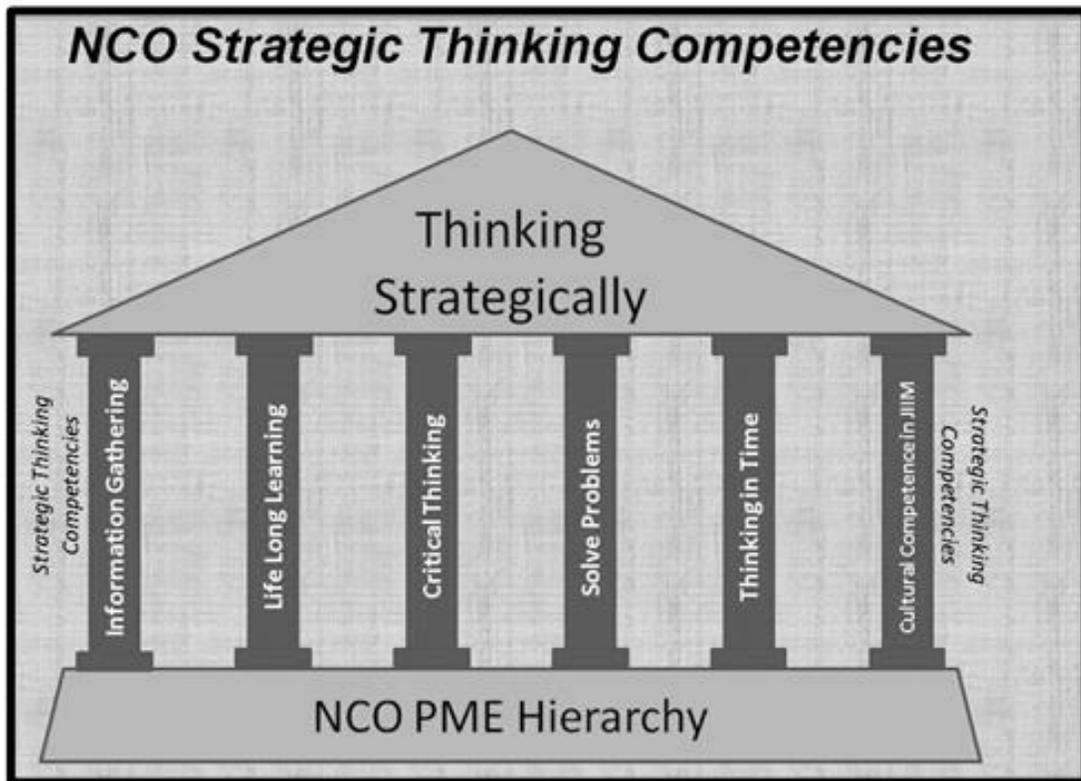


Figure 1. NCO Strategic Thinking Competencies

### Why "Think Strategically"

The uncertainty of tomorrow requires NCOs to think strategically. Webster's Dictionary defines "uncertain" as, "not clearly or precisely determined; indefinite; unknown."<sup>15</sup> Dr. Sacket notes that educating these competencies is not simple: "Strategic thinking development takes time, and thus the Army could ensure the development starts earlier in the career so that Army leaders are prepared and comfortable thinking strategically when it is required."<sup>16</sup> The Volatile, Uncertain,

Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) Operating Environment (OE) of today and tomorrow make it essential for NCOs to learn to think strategically. NCO education is so important to SMA Dailey that he has charged the Institute for NCO Professional Development (INCOPD) to develop an implementation strategy to increase the rigor within the NCO PME System.<sup>17</sup> SMA Dailey, along with COL (Ret) Alan Bourque, Aubrey Butts Ph.D., and LTC (Ret) Larry Dorsett, wrote about the need to increase the rigor of the current PME in the Military Review article “The Pen and the Sword”. They stated; “The complexity of the OE, coupled with the need to execute a full range of decentralized operations in a variety of cultures, will drive the increasing learning demand placed on NCOs.”<sup>18</sup> To ensure a more prepared NCO Corps for future environments and conflicts, the Army must increase the cognitive rigor of education. Educating NCOs to think strategically is necessary to enable adaptable and agile leaders who can thrive in complex and unknown environments.

#### Thinking Strategically in Relation to Uncertain Environments

Uncertainty characterizes the current and future operating environments. The environments are an ever-changing system of systems, in which NCO leaders must understand and operate. The Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Commander, General David Perkins, states in the Army’s Operating Concept: “no matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict.”<sup>19</sup> NCOs must prepare to thrive in complex environments and add value to operations within the JIIM environment. This level of readiness requires educating NCOs how to think strategically and understand the exponential effects of tactical and operational decisions, which may have strategic implications.

## Think Strategically to Operate Effectively in JIIM Environment

In the October 2010 “NATO NCO Strategy and Recommended NCO Guidelines”, NATO senior leaders described the importance of ensuring NCOs are educated to understand the strategic implications of decisions made when working in the multinational realm:

NCOs arriving on operations or assigned to a multi-national military organization who do not possess a required level of leadership, knowledge, skills and abilities, or competence expected by a commander, can have a detrimental effect. This places the burden on other members of the organization to either train the individual or leave the NCO in the leadership role, with the hope that they will rise to the challenge. In the worst case, the NCO may be pushed aside and the duties given to another individual who can better meet the requirements.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the VUCA environment, it is essential to educate NCOs to thrive in JIIM operations and expose them to that type of environment. To meet the demands of the JIIM environment, the Army Human Dimension Concept describes the importance of Army leaders receiving the appropriate education to thrive in future combat environments. It states, “Army leaders from fire team to theater command must be agile and adaptive, physically strong and resilient, and appropriately educated warriors of the Army Profession, with superb critical thinking skills and broad cultural understanding.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, because the Army requires highly skilled leaders leading highly adaptive teams who thrive in chaos, the Army Operating Concept includes requirements to “develop innovative leaders and optimize human performance”<sup>22</sup> as one of the ten fundamental principles of how the Army must operate in the future. Fourteen years of persistent conflict have shown the need to develop leaders who can think critically, understand the commander’s intent and exercise disciplined initiative.

## Think Strategically: Historical Precedence and Future Readiness

Conflicts prior to Iraq and Afghanistan provide examples of NCO leaders thinking strategically. In Grenada, Panama, Somalia, and Kosovo, NCOs were on the front lines making tactical decisions with strategic implications. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) offer additional examples of how the NCO Corps is resilient and able to execute tactical missions, which had strategic implications. In his article “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War”, retired Marine Corps General Charles Krulak explains how NCO actions had strategic implications: “In these situations the individual NCO was the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and influenced not only the immediate tactical situation but also the operational and strategic levels as well.”<sup>23</sup> A former United States Army Sergeants Major Academy Commandant, Colonel Don Gentry, characterized the NCO education as critical if they are to continue thriving in complex environments:

They [NCOs] have to be educated . . . they have to understand how to solve complex problems. They have to be critical and creative thinkers, because the situations they are presented with in combat are much more complex than they have been in the past. We are talking evaluation and synthesis, versus just understanding and knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

General Perkins states that in the environment in which the Army will operate, the future conflict, its allies, and coalitions are all unknown, therefore the Army must focus on “winning in a complex world”.<sup>25</sup> To win in a complex world requires the education and development of leaders who have the cognitive ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate; however, current NCO education courses are deficient in educating NCOs to think strategically.

## The Deficit in Educating and Evaluating NCOs to Think Strategically

In 2013, the Army began NCO 2020, a force-wide survey to determine changes within the NCOES to better prepare NCOs for the complex world of the future.<sup>26</sup> The Center for Army Leadership's Army Leader Development Quarterly 15-4 explained the issue with NCOES and needed refinements: "The current system is fragmented with multiple unsynchronized subsystems that do not provide all NCOs a relevant and predictable education and career progression map/model and a clearer picture of how to get promoted and be a retainable asset."<sup>27</sup> The lack of adaptability and agility within the NCOES required too much time to change which is counter to F2025B. One of F2025B's tenets is that it "requires cohesive teams, who improve and thrive in environments of persistent danger and who innovate rapidly in the face of chaos and ambiguity."<sup>28</sup> Another major NCOES concern for F2025B is that "the Army has not been able to adapt rapidly in the face of chaos and ambiguity . . . now the Army must become more agile at the strategic and institutional levels."<sup>29</sup> When SMA Dailey assumed duties as the Sergeant Major of the Army, he laid out priorities for the NCO Corps concerning education. Michelle Tan describes the SMA's thoughts in her January 30, 2015 Army Times interview:

The chief's priority is adaptive leaders for a complex world, Dailey said, adding that he plans to continue the work done at TRADOC. At the top of that list is enlisted professional military education and some sweeping changes that will come out of the NCO 2020 effort, he said, Nothing happens unless we have good leaders, so we need to continue to improve that for our soldiers, he said. I think we've made improvements, but there's still a lot of work that needs to be done.<sup>30</sup>

## Current Programs of Instruction Deficient in Educating How to Think Strategically

A review of the current Program of Instructions (POIs) for the Basic Leader Course (BLC), Advanced Leader Course (ALC), Senior Leader Course (SLC), Master

Leader Course (MLC), the Sergeants Major Course (SMC), and the Executive Leader Course (ELC) reveals inclusion of three of the six competencies of leaders who think strategically. Critical Thinking, Solves Problems, and Cultural Competence in a JIIM environment are competencies taught as early as the BLC for Sergeants. However, Comprehensive Information Gathering, Thinking in Time and Lifelong Learner are not addressed in any course within PME courses. Determining where to include the three deficient competencies is critical to ensuring NCOs receive the necessary education for learning to think strategically. Including the three missing competencies within the educational courses, reinforcing the other three competencies, and applying the appropriate end state of cognition is a step towards fixing the educational deficiencies. Additionally, the adjustments would ensure instruction at the appropriate level education for each competency throughout the career path of NCOs.

In a move to ensure NCOs attend educational courses at the appropriate point in a career, the Army instituted the Select, Train, Educate, and Promote (STEP) Program (Figure-2). On 11 August 2015, Secretary of the Army Directive 2015-31 established refined standards for all NCO promotion. This new system forces leader involvement to ensure all NCOs attend requisite schooling on time because missing the Department of the Army (DA) “training gates” will cause a non-promotion action for NCOs.

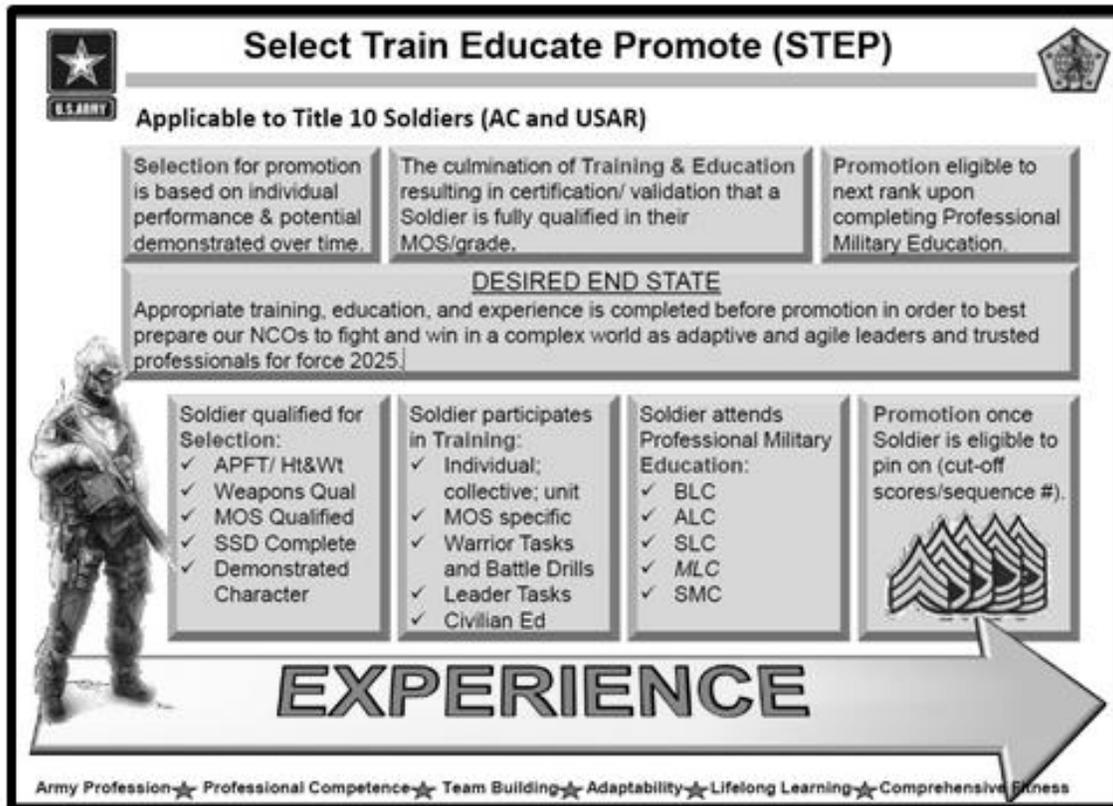


Figure 2. Army's STEP Concept

The New NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) is Deficient at Addressing Thinking Strategically

Despite the clear need for NCOs to think strategically, the new NCOER does not address nor emphasize this requirement. Implementation of the new NCOER (DA Form 2166-9) began in January 2016. Although the previous NCOER had been in place since 1987, former Chief of Staff of the Army General Raymond Odierno stated the previous evaluation report “is outdated and has not adapted to changes in doctrine or the expectations of the Army and NCO Corps over time”.<sup>31</sup>

The new NCOER is a series of three reports based on rank. Sergeants receive a “Direct Level” report, Staff Sergeants thru Master Sergeant receive an “Organizational Level Report”, and Sergeants Major thru Command Sergeants Major receive a



The new NCOER does not adequately emphasize education or the practice of strategic thinking in the current operating environment. If the Army wants to develop NCOs who are adaptable and agile, as well as educate them to think strategically, it must change the emphasis on education within the evaluation system. Emphasizing the recommended competencies in the new NCOER is an impetus for developing these competencies in future NCOs.

#### Professional Military Education as the Appropriate Venue

NCO PME refers to the professional training, development, and schooling of military personnel. It encompasses schools, universities, and training programs designed to foster leadership in military service members.<sup>34</sup> NCO PME builds leaders with a goal of educating and training them prior to assuming a rank or duty requiring the application of new knowledge. Before NCOs assume leadership positions, it is essential to educate and equip them how to think strategically at the respective levels. The current Army PME provides an effective structure to do just that. Education on thinking strategically in this construct is feasible because of the well-established and recently refined NCO PME Courses (BLC, ALC, SLC, MLC, SMC, and ELC). Achieving the PME goals and preparing NCOs to win in future conflicts requires a comprehensive education system enabled by Bloom's Taxonomy (BT).<sup>35</sup>

#### Bloom's Taxonomy as a Cognitive Enabler for an NCO PME Hierarchy

Bloom's Taxonomy is a classification system used to define and distinguish different levels of human cognition.<sup>36</sup> The levels in ascending order are Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. The current PME courses provide an effective venue for the application of BT; the goal is a clearly defined level of cognition for each course.

A proposed NCO PME Hierarchy (Figure-4) illustrates a methodology to teach NCOs to think strategically in two ways. On the left side of the chart are the NCO PME & Cognitive End-States, which synchronize the NCO Rank/Career path with the respective PME course (1) and provides the desired cognitive level end-state for each course in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy (2). On the right side, the chart (3) analytically shows the relationship between the competencies, each PME course, the respective cognitive level expected to achieve by course, and the desired cognitive end-state for each course in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy. As an example, a Specialist in BLC is expected to achieve the second level of BT (Comprehension) for competencies 1, 2, and 6 in the short four week course. However, because of the short duration of BLC, it should not be expected that the same Specialist achieves any level of cognition for competencies 3, 4, and 5. Conversely, it is implied that a Sergeant Major (SGM) at SMC can already achieve a level of cognition up to "synthesis" and when entering the year-long SMC, the expectation is for the SGM to achieve a desired cognitive end-state of "evaluation or synthesis" for all six competencies. Additionally, the chart comprehensively depicts how the levels of cognition change and adjust as NCOs progress in rank within PME System throughout a career. To show the new levels of cognition in each course, the corresponding letters within the chart tie to the BT Levels of Cognition (K, C, A1, A2, S, and E), implying that all previous levels of cognition are already acquired for that course. The "Desired Cognitive End-State" for each PME course is a measure of performance to demonstrate NCO strategic thinking. This professional hierarchy is relevant and provides the consistent, continuous rigor the NCO

Corps needs to educate NCOs to think strategically at each education level throughout the PME.

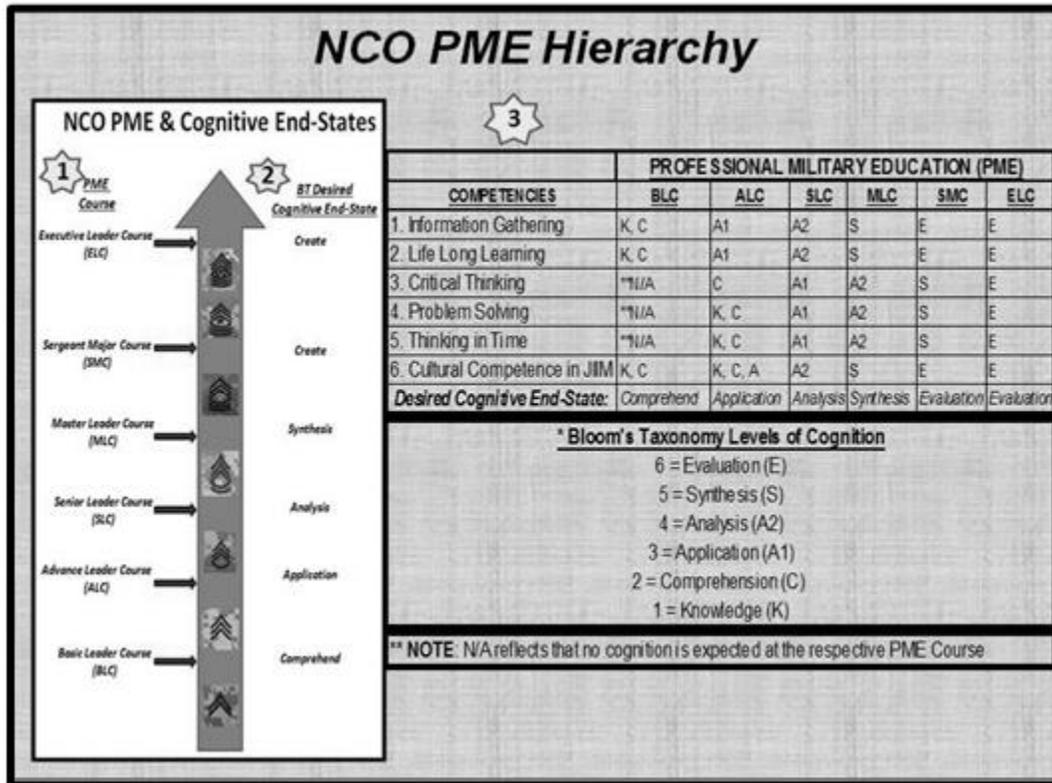


Figure 4. NCO PME Hierarchy

#### The New NCOPDS Addresses Education Gaps

The new NCOPDS provides an opportunity to address gaps in strategic thinking development within the NCO Corps. In a move to address the deficiencies within the NCOES, Headquarters Department of the Army (HQDA) published Execution Order 236-15 for the establishment of the NCOPDS.<sup>37</sup> This order transitioned the Army from an NCOES to a comprehensive NCOPDS with the goal for the Army's NCO Corps to meet future challenges.<sup>38</sup> Some of these challenges include a VUCA environment, non-state actors, and operations across the JIIM environment where tactical actions are

“seen” immediately around the world through social media, having strategic implications.

### NCOPDS Comprehensively Develops Future NCO Corps

The NCOPDS provides the Army “an adaptable and resilient NCO Corps capable of training and leading Soldiers in uncertain and complex JIIM environments.”<sup>39</sup> It supports the Army’s Human Dimension Concept, which defines human dimension as “the cognitive, physical, and social components of Soldier, Army Civilian, leader, and organizational development and performance essential to raise, prepare, and employ the Army in unified land operations.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the new NCOPDS seeks to improve Soldier optimization, which is “the process of applying knowledge, skills, and emerging technologies to improve and preserve the capabilities of Department of Defense personnel to execute essential tasks.”<sup>41</sup> Looking at the NCOPDS through a strategy lens, the desired end-states include:

- A more adaptable, resilient NCO Corps
- Improved professionalism of the NCO Corps
- Improved training and education expertise in the NCO Corps
- Challenging, relevant, and rigorous leader development training
- Revised professional development models and learning curriculums
- Identification and development of NCOs to serve at operational and strategic levels
- Support for the needs of both active and reserve units and Soldiers.<sup>42</sup>

To achieve the above end-states, the NCOPDS incorporates the NCO 4 x 6 Model (Figure-5). This model incorporates the four NCO duties, responsibilities, and

authorities (Lead; Train, Educate & Develop; Care for Soldiers & Equipment; and Maintain & Enforce Standards)<sup>43</sup> which are foundational to the development of an NCO's career. Integrated throughout the four core roles and aligned with the

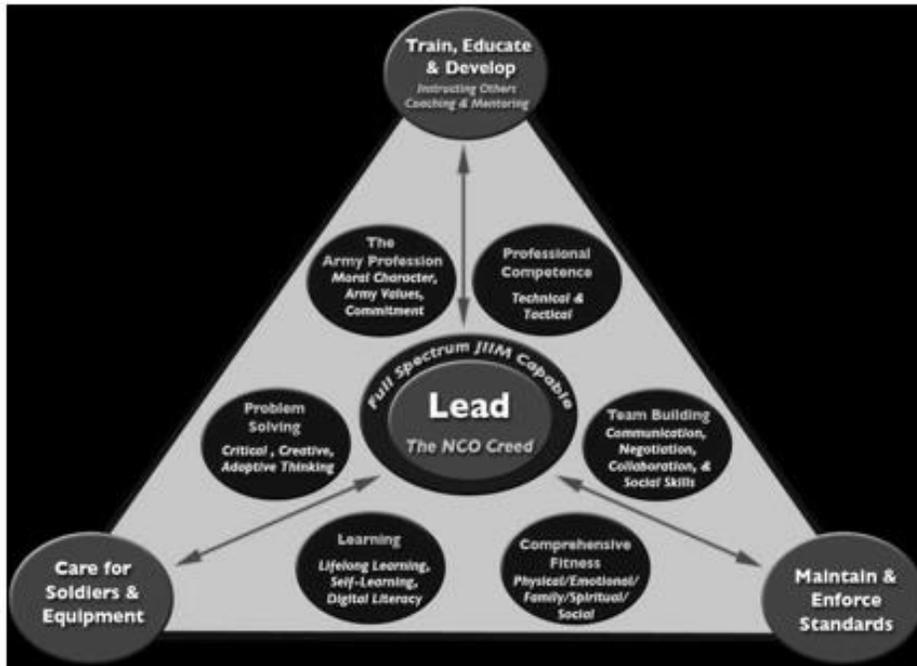


Figure 5. NCO 4 x 6 Model

21st Century Leader Attributes and competencies are six learning areas for NCOs to develop.<sup>44</sup> Figure-6 (NCO Development) is another way to depict a comprehensive career path for NCOs nested with PME courses and the NCO Vision.<sup>45</sup> The means and responsibility to incorporate the NCOPDS and the strategic thinking competencies within the PME courses lies with the TRADOC.

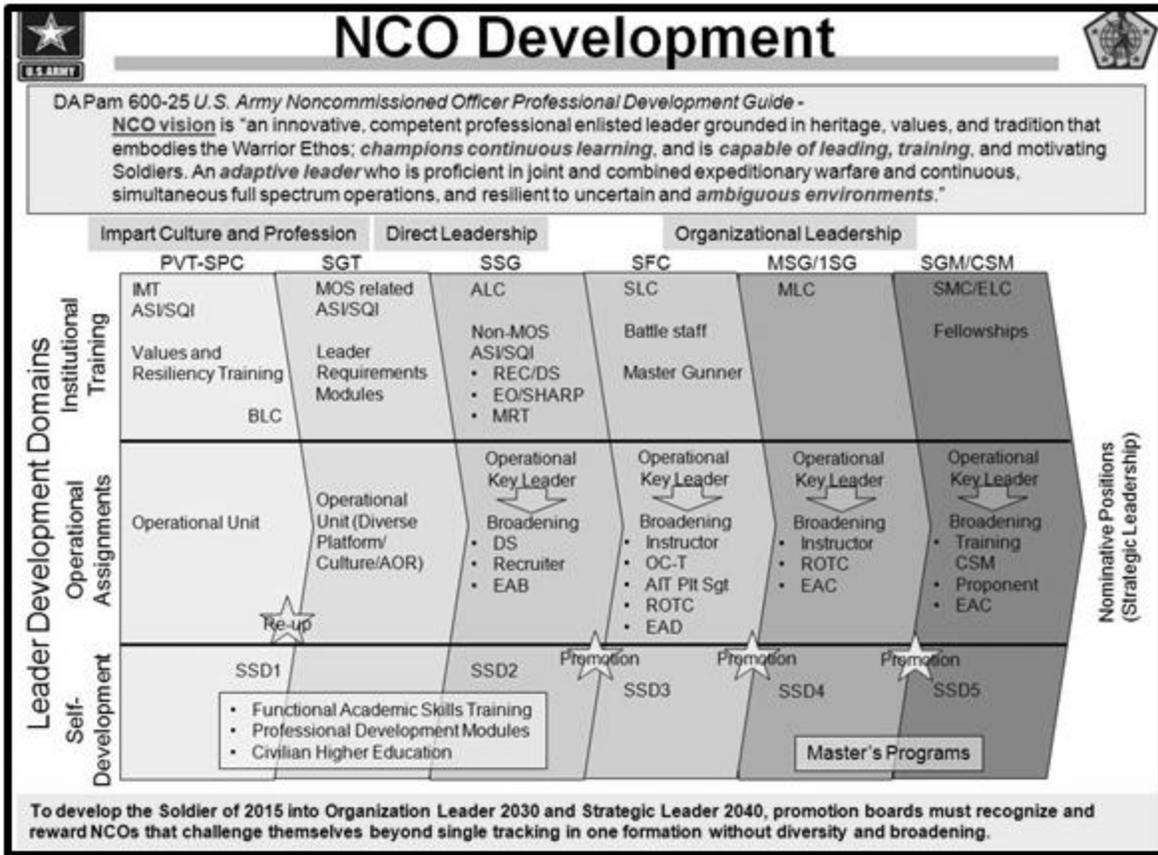


Figure 6. NCO Development

The NCOPDS concept is very feasible and essential for the comprehensive education and development of the Army NCO Corps through a PME hierarchy. It requires extensive man-hours to analyze, develop, and implement, but failing to implement the system would be detrimental. In order to ensure the Army develops the most effective solution, INCOPD used "a data driven analytical process" starting back in 2013.<sup>46</sup> The NCO 2020 Survey sent to NCOs throughout the Army asked ways to improve the NCOES. The survey, along with findings from prior surveys and discussions with senior Army leaders set the foundation for the creation of the NCOPDS.<sup>47</sup> Because full implementation is not complete, TRADOC should develop in-progress reviews to assess the suitability of the new system, make timely

recommended adjustments, and ensure sharing of all lessons learned occurs throughout the force. With the current research on hand and lessons learned implemented within the new system, the NCOPDS is on track to meet the intended end-state objectives described by INCOPD.<sup>48</sup>

Some of the inherent risks or effects with implementing a new professional development system lie with leaders ensuring NCOs meet education gates for promotion and continued service. Additionally, POIs and adding educational requirements will require greater resources for effective execution. The Army must prioritize which areas are most important to fund and select the best-qualified NCOs to serve in the institutional billets. Selecting NCOs for operational and strategic level assignments will require a less available pool for the tactical assignments and a paradigm shift in NCO talent management practices. The new NCOER seems to mitigate this risk by restricting senior rater profiles to 24%,<sup>49</sup> implying that a “pool” of those NCOs who consistently rank as the “Most Qualified” are candidates for positions at the operational and strategic levels. The stated recommendations are not perfect and critics abound on why the Army should educate NCOs to think strategically.

#### Counter-Arguments

Critics will rhetorically ask, “Why do I need NCOs to think strategically?” Or more directly, “I don’t need NCOs to think strategically, I only need them to think critically and be technically and tactically proficient.” However, this way of thinking will continue to prevent NCOs from being truly educated to think strategically and operate in the VUCA environment as adaptable and agile leaders. The current and future operating environments reflect and require the need for future leaders to think strategically. By

inculcating the education of strategic thinking competencies within a comprehensive PME and the NCOPDS, the Army can have it both ways.

Throughout the Army, there are those who believe thinking strategically is not a skill that is practicable or applicable outside the classroom, such as creative or critical thinking. Although thinking strategically is not a natural skill, it does enable practical skills. Thinking strategically requires time, practice, and attention to foundational skills.<sup>50</sup> Once taught within the institutional Army, it is imperative for the operational Army to reinforce lessons learned, provide opportunities for leaders to apply how to think strategically, and learn to “own” and hone the skill for themselves. ARI developed a practical exercise method to help leaders practice and hone strategic thinking skills.<sup>51</sup>

Another counter argument is that the Army should wait to teach strategic thinking until NCOs need the education, that is, when they are Senior NCOs. This approach may help reduce some burdens and tasks for the current NCO leadership, but will only handicap effectiveness in future operating environments. Waiting to teach NCOs to think strategically will not adequately prepare them now for the future of an uncertain environment and is counter to current progressive learning models and lessons learned from the current cohort of Command Sergeants Major. John Dewey lends some clarity on how the Army should pursue progressive education throughout an NCO’s career path when he stated the following thoughts on education:

To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command; that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, waiting until NCOs “need” the education to provide it is counter to

the Army's new STEP Program whose desired end-state is, "Appropriate training, education, and experience is completed before promotion."<sup>53</sup>

Additionally, the Army should take a long-term approach to develop leaders who think strategically. Thinking strategically is not an easily developed skill, but the Army should educate NCOs to think strategically throughout an NCO's career.

Another argument for not educating NCOs to think strategically is a belief that the Army has more pressing issues to address. This paper is not positing that thinking strategically is all the Army should address, but it is certainly a topic for consideration if the Army is to build adaptable, agile NCOs able to operate in ambiguous environments. The Army cannot afford to dismiss or not educate NCOs how to think strategically if the Army is to "win in a complex world".

## Recommendations

### #1: Adopt and Implement the NCO Strategic Education Framework

The Army needs a clear and comprehensive foundation for educating NCOs to think strategically. The NCO Strategic Education Framework (Figure-7) achieves that end in three ways. First, it clearly states competencies for how NCOs should think strategically. Second, through a PME Hierarchy it shows the overall desired cognitive end-state for each PME course in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy. Third, within the PME and each PME course, levels of cognition are defined and a desired level of cognition in relation to each of Bloom's cognitive levels. Competencies support the framework and clearly defining those within doctrine achieve the desired end. Graphically showing how an NCO progresses throughout a career is essential to developing the NCO the Army needs in 2025. The Army has a process for doctrine refinement within TRADOC and is in the process of establishing a Strategic Education Framework through a series of

Strategic Education Conferences held at the Army War College. The jury is still out on whether or not a comprehensive strategic education framework is feasible and the conference did not define the exact competencies espoused in this paper, but it did lay out an initial foundation for the definition of the competencies and the desired cognitive end-states with relation to the PME and BT. The means are a continuous dialogue between key educators and Army senior leaders publishing a comprehensive information campaign to the force.

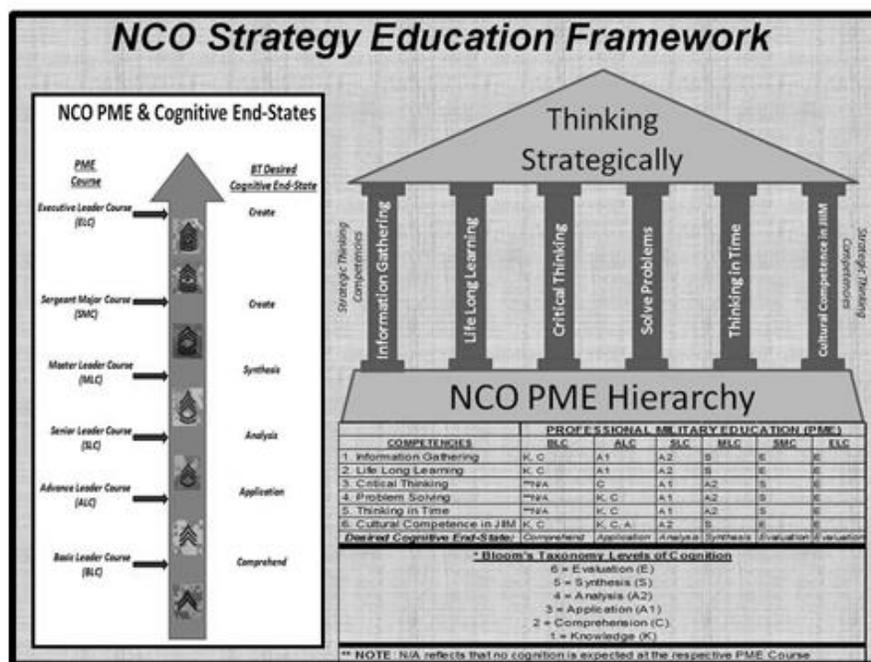


Figure 7. NCO Strategy Education Framework

This recommendation is feasible through continued dialogue with senior Army leaders, specifically the Chief of Staff and Sergeant Major of the Army ensuring clear and timely guidance on the way forward. Current Army senior leadership accepts the initiative to educate NCOs to think strategically, but has some critics throughout the force. If this initiative is to take root as part of Army culture, adopting the NCO Strategic

Education Framework (Figure-7) as a whole requires inclusion into Army doctrine. Until the correct framework and definitions are established, the force will lack a guide from which to improve the education of the NCO corps and achieve the goals and objectives established by SMA Daley.<sup>54</sup>

The inherent risks lie in not deciding upon a clear definition for thinking strategically and the complementary competencies. If leaders and Soldiers misunderstand the intent of the framework and definitions of thinking strategically, the initiative will not take root in Army culture and the NCO Corps will miss an opportunity for improved education. Doctrinally defining the framework and terms will mitigate this risk and provide a common reference for all to utilize.

The desired cognitive levels using BT requires inclusion in the POIs of each PME course. Once the three parts of this recommendation are established, TRADOC should survey and assess the validity of the recommendations, receive feedback from the force for sustains and improvements. To attain a more comprehensive assessment, TRADOC should execute such a survey within the first year of implementation, throughout the force, and from different ranks and cohorts. After the assessments are gathered, TRADOC should brief the Sergeant Major of the Army on lessons learned, recommended refinements, and future implementation recommendations with assignment of appropriate proponents and timelines to implement the approved recommendations.

## #2: Address Strategic Education in the NCOER

If thinking strategically and developing strategic thinking in the NCO Corps is an end for the Army to achieve, then the evaluation system must include an assessment metric to measure progress. Currently the new NCOER does not reinforce the

importance of strategic thinking in the NCO Corps.<sup>55</sup> One way to correct this deficiency is to use the strategic thinking competency definitions described in this paper and include them within the evaluation support form (DA Form 2166-9-1) and the NCOER itself. Raters would be required to counsel the NCOs on how they are demonstrating the identified competencies, what competencies are lacking, and recommend ways to sustain or improve. Similarly, senior raters should comment on the potential for the rated NCO to excel in positions requiring the strategic thinking competencies and recommend the rated NCO for broadening assignments, which benefit the NCO's career progression. Human Resources Command (HRC) can assist in achieving this recommendation through a survey of the new NCOER 12-18 months after implementation. The survey would require feedback from all cohorts and ranks implementing the NCO evaluation system. Once completed, an HRC team should consolidate, analyze, and back brief the Sergeant Major of the Army with analysis, recommendations, further refinement timelines, and talking points for changes to the force.

Addressing strategic education within the new NCOER is feasible because it would require a small team and a pre-determined amount of time to analyze feedback and make recommended changes to the SMA. Critics may not see this recommendation as acceptable because the new NCOER was recently implemented; however, this is an area the Army must remain vigilant, agile, and quickly adaptable to best serve the current and future NCO Corps. Once an NCO Strategic Education Framework (Recommendation #1), along with the competency definitions and desired cognitive end-state, is adopted by the Army, synchronizing the NCOER with those competencies

will be natural and suitable. This change may cause concerns that an effort to encourage Army NCOs to think strategically will move them away from the tactical and technical realms and promotion may not occur. Instructions to promotion boards can mitigate this risk by emphasizing the importance of strategic education and the need for NCOs who can thrive in ambiguity and win in a complex world. The Army's promotion board to select Sergeants Major in December 2015 attempted to address education as criteria for promotion, stating the following as guidance to board members:

Experience and Education. It is important for the NCOs you select and advance to have the right mix of field and headquarters experience, and the training and education to meet the current and future leadership requirements of both the Army and the Joint Force. To operate effectively at the strategic and national levels of government, it is critical to have the right NCOs leading our forces. With our forces supporting multiple and simultaneous operations around the globe, experience gained through deployments and in other challenging assignments prepare our NCOs to lead. Experience Counts.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, this guidance clearly emphasizes experience over education and does not clearly mention the importance of education. A clear indicator the Army is taking NCO education seriously will come when instructions to promotion board members clearly state the importance of strategic education and NCOs who exhibit the competencies of thinking strategically are selected for promotion. Only time and assessment of future senior NCO promotion boards will tell if progress has occurred.

### Conclusion

The Army should educate NCOs how to think strategically throughout the NCOPDS. Current and past NCOs have proven effective in combat from tactical to strategic levels and many NCO tactical decisions have strategic implications. The Army cannot allow the education of the NCO to atrophy or take a backseat in priority. Where does the Army go from here concerning the education of the NCO Corps of 2025?

Progress will depend on how much emphasis the Army places in educating NCOs to think strategically. If the answer is to continue the status quo where NCOs stay focused on the tactical level of operations, the future NCO Corps may not adapt nor thrive in future complex environments. If the answer is to develop a comprehensive framework to educate the NCO Corps of 2025, then a clear and comprehensive Strategic Education Framework is required.

Adopting and implementing the NCO Strategic Education Framework (Figure-7) will establish a thorough foundation for educating NCOs to think strategically and excel in future complex environments. Future Army doctrinal updates should include the definition of “think strategically” and include the strategic thinking competencies; enabling a common foundation to establish and implement the PME Hierarchy throughout the NCO Career path. Additionally, defining the end-state for each course using Bloom’s Taxonomy provides a reference of the desired cognitive levels to achieve within each course in the NCO PME system. The Strategic Education Framework serves as a foundation for future refinements to the current NCOER and promotion boards.

If the Army is serious about educating NCOs to think strategically, the importance of stressing education within the evaluation and promotion systems is also essential. The current NCOER does not emphasize education, but refinements are feasible after 12-18 months of initial implementation. HRC should conduct surveys with leaders in the force and consolidate recommended changes and brief the SMA on a strict timeline for future implementation. The current promotion board guidance for senior NCOs does not emphasize education; making education a priority within the Army requires future

guidance to promotion boards to emphasize education as positive criteria for promotion, as the NCO Corps will not see education as a priority until promotion boards show the benefits. The new NCOER and portions of the current Sergeant Major promotion board guidance are a start, but require further refinement before Army culture fully incorporates educating NCOs to think strategically as the norm.

The Army is at a significant juncture for effective change in educating NCOs for the future because changes made now will affect the Army in 10-20 years. The NCO Corps is what allows the Army to sustain overmatch against any foe. The Army should invest in educating NCOs to think strategically based on the framework and competencies outlined in this paper. If the NCO Corps of 2025 is going to thrive and win in the future complex environment, the level of complexity requires NCOs that can learn rapidly, prepare mentally, and solve complex problems. The time is now to adopt a clear NCO Strategic Education Framework in order to develop and sustain strategic thinking in the NCO Corps of 2025.

## Endnotes

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