# A Study of the NCO Common Core Competencies Framework of the US Army

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**Abstract.** Non-commissioned officers are the combat, management, training, and technical backbone of the armed forces at the grassroots troops and play a mainstay role in the development and construction of the US military. The US military attaches great importance to the cultivation of non-commissioned officers' management ability and leadership ability and has established a perfect system of Professional Military Education and courses for non-commissioned officers. The NCO Common Core Competencies are the basis of constructing the framework of modern Non-commissioned Officer Professional Military Education, which runs through the whole career of all non-commissioned officers. This paper discusses the emergence, development, content and application of NCO Common Core Competencies, and expects how to develop the six kinds of competencies.

**Keywords:** US Army; NCO Common Core Competencies; Professional Military Education

## 1 Introduction

The US military's multi-domain combat concept is constantly advancing, the troops are gradually equipped with all kinds of high-tech weapons, and the role and status of all-round and technical sergeants are constantly rising. It is great significance to study how to train high-quality non-commissioned officers with development potential to meet the needs of military posts for meeting the diversified operational needs of the US military.

US army sergeants plan their career directions and receive promotion training in accordance with the system and requirements of selection, training and promotion. In order to enable them to better receive promotion training, the US Army carries out the Distributed Leader Course (DLC). According to the DLC model, the US Army Professional Military Education is clearly divided into six levels, which are related to the five important stages of the sergeant's career. The order from low to high is preparatory level, primary level, intermediate level, senior level and administrative level. Each level of training has its own characteristics in the depth, length, breadth and training objectives of the content, and it connects with each other and improves step by step. This

practical training model provides prospects and power for the sustainable development of non-commissioned officers. In the process of growing up from junior to advanced, the construction of curriculum resources is gradual, and the training contents and objectives of each level are designed on the basis on the Non-commissioned Officer Common Core Competencies framework of all levels and take this as the basis for planning, management, implementation and evaluation.

## 2    The Emergence, Development and Content of NCO Common Core Competencies

### 2.1    The Emergence and Development

The NCO 2020 Strategy was promulgated by the Army Training and Doctrine Command in December 2015. This strategy summarized the Development, Talent Management, and Stewardship of the Profession which called three main lines of effort. The strategy further summarized how the US Army education system evolved and extended from NCOES to the NCOPDS.[1] The six kinds of leader core competencies were also promoted by this strategy and build the related framework of Common Core Competencies. It is also guiding the change to Non-commissioned Officer Professional Military Education and NCO leader development.

Over the past decade, the obvious gaps have been found in NCO education. The senior Army leaders found gaps in Non-commissioned Officer Professional Military Education, and the gaps were between the Senior Leaders Course and the Sergeant Major Course. Therefore, relevant departments conducted an in-depth analysis of the topic, gap and demand in order to fill these gaps. Through this analysis, 320 tasks that non-commissioned officer leaders need to accomplish were summarized. The 320 NCO leader tasks were submitted to Critical Task Site Selection Board. According to these tasks, Critical Task Site Selection Board determined 27 essential skills and tasks. These were skills and tasks that US Army non-commissioned officers should be proficient in and good at.

After six months, related officers occurred a further analysis again by using the accountable instructional system. The further analysis summarized six major subject areas and the six major subject areas was related to the Army Learning areas. [2] [4] The analysis also created a basic framework for the redesign of Professional Military Education for US Army non-commissioned officers. The basic framework included the Leadership, Communications, Operations, Readiness, Program Management and Training Management. The basic framework was submitted to the TRADOC and then the Leader Core Competence were established through this basic framework. Because it was often confused with the term Core Leader Competency, so the Leader Core Competency was changed to NCO Common Core Competencies according to the Leader Requirements Model. [3]

Through the basic framework of NCO Common Core Competencies, the US Army has redesigned and developed the curriculum of NCO Professional Military Education. And the NCO Common Core Competencies is the main line of the curriculum system

of NCO Professional Military Education. US Army designed a six-level Distributed Leadership Course through this main line, old five-level Structure Self Development was replaced by the new Distributed Leader Course of six levels. The education system for the US Army non-commissioned officers was designed and developed again by this the basic framework of NCO Common Core Competencies. It makes the non-commissioned officers of the US Army more adaptable, innovative and of great practical significance through the model of six-level Distributed Leader Course (DLC) which was designed through the NCO Common Core Competencies framework.

## 2.2    The Content of the NCO Common Core Competencies

The NCO Common Core Competencies refers to the six kinds of competencies which are taught in the Professional Military Education, including the competency of Leadership, the competency of Operations, the competency of Readiness, the competency of Communication, the competency of Training Management, and the competency of Program Management.[4] Because the six kinds of competencies are called common core competencies, so these competencies are common to all non-commissioned officers of US Army regardless of rank and position.

### 2.2.1. The Subject Areas of NCO Common Core Competencies.

Each competency contains a corresponding subject area. These subject areas are based on the skills, knowledge and abilities that an NCO should possess.

The Competency of LEADERSHIP: The Army non-commissioned officers need to carry out daily operations, carry out mission commands, and make goal decisions. The competency of leadership mainly includes exercising the Development of Leadership, being familiar with the Ethic and values of the Army and Character Development. And includes a deep understanding of how to think critically and solve complex problems.

The Competency of COMMUNICATIONS: The non-commissioned officers need to be qualified communicators and play a role of leadership, organizational training, consultation and guidance through effective communication. Communications mainly includes Speaking in Public, Briefings of Military, Writing in English. And the competencies of using the social media, using Digital Communications or using Online Conduct are also important.

The Competency of READINESS: The non-commissioned officers is the backbone of the army, who undertakes the responsibility of soldiers' combat readiness and training and plays a key role in the army's combat readiness. This competency mainly includes Military Inspection, Command Support, Soldiers' Comprehensive Physical Fitness (physical, spiritual, emotional, social and family) and Soldiers' Preparation.

The Competency of TRAINING MANAGMENT: The non-commissioned officers are responsible to train the individual soldiers, crews and teams. The non-commissioned officers should plan, prepare, implement and evaluate effective training on the basis on the military training principles. This competency mainly includes carrying out risk prevention management, being familiar with the Training Management System, and being able to use the Training Model of 8 steps, etc.

The Competency of OPERATIONS: The non-commissioned officers should have outstanding resilience in a dangerous and complex battlefield environment. The competency mainly includes Operational Competencies, Multi-Domain Combat Competencies, Force Leadership Procedures, Military Decision-Making Competencies, familiarity with operational forces and operational terminology/symbols.

The Competency of PROGRAM MANAGMENT: The non-commissioned officers should also assist their officers in the management that support soldiers and their families. The competency mainly includes Military Security Management, Military Vocational Education, Human Resources Management Systems, Military Operation Management, Military Justice Procedures, and they also need to know how the Army runs.

## 3 The Application of NCO Common Core Competencies Framework

### 3.1 The ALAs and GLOs supported by NCO Common Core Competencies

The Army Learning Areas and the related General Learning Outcomes are the important part of the development of vocational education for US Army non-commissioned officers. In 2015, related institutions announced four Army Learning Areas and 14 related General Learning Outcomes. They were used to develop the common core of Army Professional Military Education in order to support the NCO Professional Development System.

And then in 2019, four new Army Learning Areas were announced by the Combined Arms Center Commanding General, the four new Army Learning Areas includes Leadership and Profession, Mission Command, Operations, and Training, their 12 associated General Learning Outcomes were announced too. Table 1 is about the four new Army Learning Areas and the related General Learning Outcomes.

**Table 1.** NCO C3 and the Army Learning Areas and General Learning Outcomes supported by NCO C3[Self-drawn]

| NCO C3 | Army Learning Areas | General Learning Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Leadership | Leadership and the Army Profession | 1. Skillfully create and maintain an organizational atmosphere of trust and have a sense of military identity. |
| Program Management | | 2. Skillfully use of the types of army leadership competencies which are described in the Leadership Requirements Model. |
| Readiness | | 3. Skillfully implement the basic principles of development and maintain sustainable development. |

| Communications | Mission Command | 4. Proficient in mission command principles. |
| Operations | | 5. Proficient in command elements and control elements. |
| Readiness | | 6. Proficient in command and control of WFF tasks and systems, use the WFF to integrate combat force elements. 7. Proficient in the basic principles of the operations process, let the leaders be able to understand, visualize, describe and lead operations. 8. Proficient in thinking critically and creatively. |
| Operations | Operations | 9. Demonstrate proficiency in synchronizing all WFF in a unified land operation, let the WFF be able to support joint operations. |
| Readiness | | 10. Demonstrate the ability to understand OE in all areas. 11. Proficient in the maintenance function of supporting army operations. |
| Training Management | Training | |
| Readiness | | 12. Proficient in training planning, preparation, implementation and evaluation. |

From the Table 1, we can find that the Army Learning Areas are supported directly by the NCO Common Core Competencies, while the Army Learning areas and its General Learning Outcomes link the subjects of the NCO Common Core Competencies that each non-commissioned officer should possess. Each Army Learning Area and its General Learning Outcome have corresponding subjects of NCO Common Core Competencies and they are connected and correspond to each other. In order to strengthen Professional Military Education with the Army Learning Areas and General Learning Outcomes together, the NCO Common Core Competencies Framework provides the lesson subjects for the further development of the Professional Military Education.

These were used to build the Distributed Leader Course as the main line in order to meet the intent of the Army Leader Development System and Army Learning Strategy.

## 3.2 NCO Common Core Competencies and the Professional Military Education

The NCO Common Core Competencies provide progressive and sequential education for the first time and use the Distributed Leader Course (DLC) to achieve the expected strategic goal of Professional Military Education. Distributed Leader Course (DLC)

requires students to study continuously throughout their careers, and the classroom learning content is closely related to practical learning. In each level of course, the focus on the NCO Common Core Competencies is also different and students are required to achieve the NCO Common Core Competencies at this level of the course before entering the next level. The competencies listed at this level are not static, they are only current focus areas and need to be reassessed if necessary to maintain relevance to needs.

The Basic Leader Course (BLC) helps the Corporals and Sergeants exercise the skills of basic leader with the aim of training them to be smart, thoughtful and innovative, help them to lead or train the teams. This course focuses on the six NCO Common Core Competencies: the competency of Leadership, the competency of Communications, the competency of Readiness, the competency of Training Management, the competency of Operations, and the competency of Program Management.[4] [5]

The Advanced Leader Course (ALC) is to prepare the Sergeants to grow as a Staff Sergeant. It will further develop the critical thinking, creative thinking and written and teach the Sergeants how to solve the more complex problems. While the Advanced Leadership Course, students will exercise the skills in oral communication or written. As a result, the students will cultivate the ability of leading, training and conducting operations at the squad level. [4] [5]

The Senior Leader course (SLC) is to prepare the Staff Sergeant to become a Sergeant First Class. At this level, the course pays more attention to train the students' leadership and innovation ability. The students will use the model of "knowing oneself and knowing the enemy" to cultivate the leadership ability of non-commissioned officers. Non-commissioned officers will study management skills, analyze mission command systems, create platoon plans and leadership training plans, and learn basic principles of how to negotiate. [4] [5]

The Master Leader Course (MLC) prepares for the leadership and staff operations of a Sergeant First Class to become a Master Sergeant and the First Sergeant. While this level, students will be allowed to apply joint planning procedures to support combat operations of multi-domain environments, and to conduct action plans at and above the company level, making appropriate recommendations to their officers. Students will develop the skills of writing, communicating, critical thinking and complex problem solving. [4] [5]

The Sergeant Major Course (SMC) mainly helps Master Sergeants prepare for the rank of Sergeant Major. And the course includes the areas of how to further strengthen leadership, how to assist the chief officer in the management department, how-to carry-on team building and training management. [4] [5]

The application of the NCO Common Core Competencies provides a basic framework for designing the lessons of Professional Military Education. And NCO Common Core Competencies support the Select, Train, Educate and Promote process. The Select, Train, Educate and Promote programs is continuous and progressive. In the process of the growth of non-commissioned officers from primary to advanced, education and training is step by step, and each level of education and training corresponds to the related level of non-commissioned officers. This progress shaped Professional Military Education and the Non-commissioned Officer Professional Develop System

(NCOPDS) in order to establish higher-level promotion requirements formed by NCO Common Core Competencies.

## 4     Conclusion

It is significance to improve the US Army's combat effectiveness to train the technical talents who can adapt the diversified combat tasks. This paper makes an in-depth study about the framework of US Army NCO Common Core Competencies from the aspects of history, development, content and application. This paper also studies how to redesign and construct the system of US Army Professional Military Education by using the NCO Common Core Competencies framework. The complexity of the current and future combat environment puts forward higher requirements for sergeants in terms of ability and cognition. They must be able to look at problems from multiple perspectives, have a certain ability to innovate, and understand the geographical factors, cultural factors, linguistic factors, technical factors and tactical factors that affect operations. Non-commissioned officers must also have the competency to deal with problems and make decisions on their own, think independently and think critically. In order to train such a high-quality sergeant, a perfect vocational education system for non-commissioned officers is indispensable.

As the basis of the curriculum design of Professional Military Education System of the United States Army, it has great practical significance that study the research and development of NCO Common Core Competencies framework. The six kinds of competencies are not only a high summary of the core competence that sergeant generally needs, but also the key guide to know the curriculum design of Professional Military Education, and it is also the goal that sergeants constantly pursue in their careers. Of course, the non-commissioned officers of the US Army should also pay attention to the cultivation of six kinds of NCO Common Core Competencies (the competency of Leadership, the competency of Communication, the competency of Readiness, the competency of Training Management, the competency of Operations, and the competency of Program Management) in the process of daily training and learning.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Author contributions

M.J. conceived the idea of the study. L.H. performed the literature search. X.H. analyzed materials and wrote the paper.

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