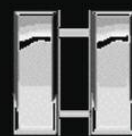


CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Platoon Leaders

Professional Development That Platoon Leaders Value

The outcome goal of Army leader development is “competent and confident leaders capable of leading trained and ready units.”—ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*.

No one expects lieutenants to learn everything at their basic officer leadership course (BOLC). We expect them to arrive at their units needing (and wanting) to be radical learners. In addition to on-the-job experience and constant feedback from their commander and NCOs, some lieutenants are getting more: They are benefiting from quality officer professional development (OPD).

To get a sense of lieutenants’ experiences with and aspirations for professional-development programs in their units, we reached out through the Platoon Leader forum (<http://pl.army.mil>) to hear the perspectives of today’s lieutenants. In this article, we report on two of the questions that we asked:

1. If you’ve experienced an especially good OPD session, tell us about it.

2. Fast-forward three years. You’re a company commander, and there is white space on the calendar. What type of OPD program are you running?

If you’ve experienced an especially good OPD session, tell us about it.

We have a good program in our infantry battalion. About once a month, platoon sergeants and above come in to do some sort of discussion on tactics. Each starts with a PowerPoint presentation as a refresher on the subject and then concludes with a practical exercise in which we have to put our knowledge into practice. The platoon command team briefs the battalion commander and command sergeant major at the conclusion of each practical exercise. The battalion commander also has breakfast with the lieutenants once a month. Sometimes we have a reading assignment; other times, we just discuss things happening in the unit, the Army or the world.

★

To me, the best OPDs are those in which there’s a real give-and-take and everyone’s experiences are valued. Even the mentor gets mentored in this kind of OPD because there is always something to learn.

★

The best experience I’ve had so far has been with my current commander. She has an OPD session at least once a month, if not more often. She has given us all a reading assignment to help develop our leadership skills, and she mentors us every chance she gets. We have weekly officer PT [physical training] sessions, which she uses as another opportunity to work with us. She is approachable and outgoing and has been fantastic in every way.

★

I’ve experienced too many good OPD sessions to count. The best one so far, in my opinion, was over the battle of Wanat, Afghanistan. We were given a book, and we discussed the material over many LPD [leader professional development] sessions. We had a representative come down from Fort Leavenworth, Kan., who gave us a better understanding of the terrain so that we could analyze the decisions that were made on the ground.

What is a “radical learner”?

There is typically a significant gap between what new lieutenants know and what we need them to know. Closing that gap quickly requires an all-out commitment to learning that can be described as extreme or radical. When your responsibility is life-or-death, every moment counts.

Be a radical learner!

★

The best I have been involved with was a book review of *Black Hearts: One Platoon’s Descent into Madness in Iraq’s Triangle of Death*. The focus was on how we can become better leaders by learning from the examples in the book.

★

My best OPD was conducted at the simulation center in preparation for our National Training Center [NTC] rotation. First, we talked about tactical tasks: screen, guard, movement to contact, etc. Then we did an on-screen simulation using NTC terrain, with a few variables that were tweaked, such as location of the enemy and speed of friendly forces. We finished with a discussion about what we learned.

★

Officers in the 192nd Infantry Brigade, Fort Benning, Ga., benefit from a robust officer professional development (OPD) program. Here they discuss leadership over lunch.



A few officers from my battalion would meet informally every once in a while on deployment at our forward operating base to discuss moral/ethical topics in a forum that was really enjoyable.

★

While we were deployed, OPDs were largely mission oriented. They included subjects such as engagement-area development, breaching an obstacle and medevac/casevac. Back in garrison, the OPDs have almost exclusively been dedicated to the command supply discipline program [CSDP].

★

The most pertinent OPD I have been in was about mission planning. Although this is something I thought I was proficient in, the OPD brought to light many deployment lessons about managing troops and operating with diminished numbers. That learning has proved vital in recent months as we are preparing to deploy under a force cap of 75 percent.

★

As members of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), we do a lot of air assault mission training. Most of us never see the planning that goes into it; we just receive the operations order and execute it. My favorite OPD was one that went into detail about the planning model and all the different planning factors. It introduced us to the aviation members and their role in the process. It helped us recognize

why we execute things the way we do and the importance of our specific actions while executing air assaults.

★

If I had to pick one, it would be a planning session we conducted for a simulated, no-notice airborne operation to forcibly insert onto an enemy drop zone and conduct follow-on operations. We went over every last tiny detail from corps to platoon level. It gave me a very good understanding of the process and gave me confidence in our ability to execute if the need arises.

★

The commander sat all three platoon leaders down and went over how to conduct operations orders and what he expects compared to what we learned at BOLC.

★

Just last month we conducted an OPD on the military decision-making process [MDMP]. We hit every step of the process in-depth, which enlightened me.

LTC Greg Harkins (Cdr., 4-23 IN) leads officer physical training (PT) at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash. PT includes a five-mile run and a brisk morning lake swim to reinforce fitness and camaraderie.





While deployed to Afghanistan, LTC David Kramer (Cdr., 1-10 AVN) had his officers read the "CompanyCommand" article from the latest ARMY Magazine and then meet to discuss it.

★
My best OPD session happened after our Afghanistan deployment. We had just finished reset, and the change of command and platoon leader changes were done. Our new squadron commander took all of the officers on a two-day tour of the training facilities and ranges available to us.

★
My company commander describes our OPD program as "physical professional development for officers." I would describe it as "getting broken off at least once a week with collective suffering." I love it!

★
Watching the HBO miniseries "Band of Brothers" and talking about the leadership lessons with our battalion commander.

★
We recently did a ruck march and walked up to a scenic spot to look out on the lights of the base. On the way up, our current-ops captain stopped to read a piece on integrity and, on the way down, asked us about the character traits we appreciate and how we would change the Army. It was good for sparking discussion and building camaraderie. Good PT, too!

★
We took and discussed the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation tool and other personality tests. This told me a lot about who I am as a leader and how I can best use my personal characteristics with others.

★
The one that stands out for me was the OPD that my battalion commander, along with the XO and S-3, gave everyone in the battalion at our annual training. They explained how we need to map out our career from start to finish and be willing to move around or switch branches. I came away with a greater understanding of the promotion process and the unique factors in the National Guard.

★
Our battalion runs "PL University," in which the battalion commander, XO and S-3 run a seminar for the day about what it means to be a platoon leader, where the battalion is headed, our future careers as officers, etc.

★
My battalion commander pulled out his old OERs [Officer Evaluation Report] and support forms. He went through them line by line, explaining what was written and why. He had recommendations for how we should complete ours. Particular emphasis was put on using action verbs as well as the difference between strong and weak comments. The key takeaway was that a poorly written OER will make a quality officer look lackluster at best.

★
Command supply discipline program: We discussed conducting inventories and property management, along with organizational clothing and individual equipment and the responsibilities that go with that. This was great information to prep any lieutenant for property management.

★
After our deployment, my company commander solicited OPD ideas from the lieutenants and then tailored a class based on that. I found this really beneficial because the topics were of interest to us.

★
We have OPDs regarding the officer corps—topics like the new OER system and promotion boards—followed by beer call, which allows officers to get to know each other.

Fast-forward three years. You're a company commander, and there is white space on the calendar. What type of OPD program are you running?

★
My OPDs will be monthly at the least, geared towards subjects such as job positions, how to effectively brief different audiences and writing (official correspondence, essays, memorandums, OERs/NCOERs, awards, counseling).

★
I will start with a low-key get-together for each of us to get to know our fellow officers better. Then I will start down my list: composite risk management, operations order production, course of action development and analysis from MDMP, and finally, professional reading. In addition to general lead-



Leaders in 4/101 conducted a leader challenge workshop that featured a platoon leader's dilemma working with Afghan National Security Forces. OPDs can be highly engaging and relevant and can reinforce teamwork and a sense of professional identity.

ership books, I like topical reading for theater-specific deployments. Before Afghanistan, I had read a number of books about the people of Afghanistan, including several biographies. I think that knowing the Afghan people before getting there helped me greatly in my dealings with them.

★

My OPDs would always include open discussion about what is causing friction or confusion with my subordinates and soldiers.

★

I will definitely bring the platoon sergeants and lieutenants together and walk through a training cycle. I want them to understand all the different moving pieces that must come together for quality training to happen (for example, how and

when to coordinate for land, ammunition, food, transportation, etc.). I want my leaders to understand the need to plan in detail well before the actual event.

★

I believe you learn the most when you teach something; therefore, I would have my platoon leaders take ownership of key topics and give them the responsibility to teach us. I would also regularly use informal OPD sessions to pass on the knowledge I've gained.

★

I would make our missions (our work) the central feature of our OPD program. I would sit down with my subordinates before a mission or key training event and discuss it in-depth. Soon after the mission or event, I would do after action reviews to discuss how things went.

★

The two key elements of my OPD program will be: (1) developmental counseling focused on strengths and weaknesses and what they can do to get better and (2) professional reading focused on books about geopolitical hot spots, advanced scout skills and great cavalry officers in history.

★

I would really like to emulate the OPD program that my squadron runs: professional reading with a follow-up discussion and studying historic battles.

★

One crucial area that lieutenants don't know enough about is NCO development—how to write an effective

Four OPD Tools for Your Kit Bag

1. The Commander's Handbook for Unit Leader Development (The Center for Army Leadership) is available online and has good ideas about leader development, including OPDs. The Center for Army Leadership's resource page is: go.usa.gov/4qxx.

2. The Pro-Reading Challenge (PRC). At its essence, the PRC is to read and talk about a book with your team of leaders at least once a year. The CC forum (<http://cc.army.mil>) sponsors the PRC for company commanders, providing them five free copies of a book and creating an online space in the forum for them to talk about the book with their lieutenants. Read more about it here: <http://go.usa.gov/ghu3> ("The Pro-Reading Challenge: One Achievable Step for Army Leader Development," ARMY Magazine, February 2011) and check out the Read2Lead forum (<http://read2lead.army.mil>), where company commanders can sign up.

3. Leader Challenge. A Leader Challenge begins with a

real leader describing a tough challenge that he/she actually experienced and includes both an interactive online experience and a face-to-face session in which leaders gather in small groups to discuss the scenario. You can find the Leader Challenge video vignettes online at <http://LC.army.mil>, which is part of the Army professional forum network.

4. Platoon Leader Forum. Imagine if there were an online forum in which thousands of platoon leaders connected with each other to talk about building and leading combat-effective platoons. That's exactly what the PL forum is. In addition to having easy access to tools such as ready-made OPORD [operations order] formats, platoon leaders can ask and answer questions. In the process, they learn and become more effective leaders as well as gain a greater appreciation for the larger profession. Send your platoon leaders to <http://PL.army.mil> to connect in their professional forum.

NCOER, for example. I would have my first sergeant give his perspective on NCOERs as well as on the platoon leader/platoon sergeant relationship.

★

My OPD plan will include an initial focus on unit readiness, followed by things like setting personal career and physical fitness goals. I want my lieutenants to be equipped to do the same for all their soldiers.

★

My OPDs would generally focus on planning and tactics, but I would also ensure that I mix in OPDs on important administrative topics as well.

★

I would run OPDs pertaining to additional duties that they will be assigned as lieutenants—for example, arms room, supply, maintenance, training room, communications, NBC [nuclear, biological and chemical], etc. These are the things they fail to teach at BOLC, yet sometimes you do more of them than what they actually teach you at BOLC.

★

I don't know what the Army of 2015/16 will be like, but I have been blindsided by not knowing much about legal matters and investigations. I will teach my lieutenants how to accomplish these tasks without making fools of themselves as I have.

★

My OPD focus will be on property accountability, roles of the XO, how to use a hand receipt, use of DA Form 200 (transmittal record), interaction with the supply NCO, officer promotion timeline and career opportunities like post-command fellowships.

★

If I were a company commander with white space, I would organize an OPD session about career opportunities. I feel that this would help motivate and inspire officers in the company to work towards future career goals. Then, regular meetings discussing different topics would be a sufficient OPD program.

★

Up front, I will meet informally with my officers (over meals, for example) to get to know them. I will follow that up with some shared experiences like ruck marches, officer PT, and outings (e.g., snowshoeing).

Six Most Popular OPD Topics

(Based on lieutenants' responses to question 2)

1. Administrative actions (counseling, awards, evaluations, Uniform Code of Military Justice).
2. Mission focused (MDMP, tactical tasks, after action reviews).
3. Officer career progression.
4. Logistics, CSDP, maintenance.
5. Training development, mission-essential task lists.
6. Professional reading and current-events discussions.

If you've read this article and are thinking—"My unit doesn't do OPDs like this!"—you are not alone. The Army's most recent Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (the CASAL) found that 14 percent of active component (AC) leaders never participate in formal leader development activities such as OPD, NCOPD and "sergeant's time," and 52 percent of leaders report they engage in these activities rarely or occasionally. Only 35 percent of AC leaders report that they participate in formal leader development activities frequently or very frequently. Further, these activities are viewed as having a small, very little or no impact on development by 47 percent of leaders, while 29 percent rate the positive impact on their development as moderate.

One of our sacred roles as company commanders is to train and develop our lieutenants. As we have seen in this article, OPDs are another tool that exceptional company commanders are using to do so. The practice of gathering with your lieutenants on a regular basis can be highly engaging and relevant and, in the process, can reinforce teamwork and a sense of professional identity.

One insight that emerged in the responses from lieutenants is that those who have not experienced quality OPDs find it difficult to think about how they will use them when they are company commanders in the future. On the other hand, lieutenants who experience quality OPDs have a vision for how they will use them. This insight underscores how important it is for us to develop our leaders; our example today equips them to develop their leaders tomorrow.

Company commanders: Please join us in the new-and-improved version of our online professional forum to continue the conversation: <http://CC.army.mil>.



**Connecting in conversation...
...becoming more effective.**



Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?