

Communication Skills Development for Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs)

**Kara L. Orvis, Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo,
Kristy M. Kay, Krista A. Ratwani**

**Aptima, Inc.
Woburn, MA
korvis@aptima.com,
jshenbergertrujillo@aptima.com,
kkay@aptima.com**

**April D. Sanders
U.S. Army Research Institute
Fort Hood, TX
april.d.sanders9.civ@mail.mil**

ABSTRACT

The Army NCO corps is an extremely diverse population of individuals from various ethnic, language, and socio-educational backgrounds. Being able to communicate effectively with Soldiers, officers, and civilians is an essential skill for all NCOs. However, recent literature suggests that many NCOs have communication skills deficits (Ward, 2018). Before training solutions can be recommended, more research is needed to better understand the development of communication skills in NCOs and the most common challenges that they experience while learning these skills. The purpose of this research was fourfold: (a) identify communication skill requirements and competency levels in NCOs; (b) identify current institutional, operational, and self-development activities; (c) identify communication challenges; and (d) recommendations for instructional solutions. This research was conducted using semi-structured focus groups and questionnaires with 225 Soldiers, NCOs, and officers. Results indicate that the majority of communication skills are learned on the job, but that very little formal training is provided. The development of writing skills was identified as a particular challenge. Many NCOs reported that the development of writing skills varied greatly according to their senior leadership and Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). Further, results did not suggest significant differences related to culture, generational issues, or language. Results also indicate that while there is increasing use of texting as a primary method of communication, there is also emphasis on face-to-face communication when available. Finally, there is a need for on-the-job training solutions that are simple and fit into regular work activities. This paper will discuss these communication skills training challenges and suggest practical recommendations for resolving them.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kara L. Orvis is a Principal Scientist and Vice President of Research and Development at Aptima. She has 20 years of experience conducting military R&D, with much of that experience being specific to the Army with areas of leadership, teams, assessment, and training. Dr. Orvis holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from George Mason University and a B.A. in Psychology from Ohio Wesleyan University.

April D. Sanders is a Research Psychologist at the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) Fort Hood Unit. She has 15 years of experience working with veterans and active duty Soldiers in both clinical and research activities. Dr. Sanders holds a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Houston, a M.Ed. in Counselor Education from Clemson University and a B.S. in Sociology from the University of Florida.

Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo is a Scientist at Aptima. She has experience with assessment of individual and group performance, operational readiness, and unit climate, and she contributes to ongoing research with government agencies. Dr. Shenberger-Trujillo holds a BA in Applied Psychology from the University of Illinois at Chicago, a MA in Experimental Psychology and PhD in General Psychology from the University of Texas at El Paso.

Kristy M. Kay is an Associate Scientist at Aptima, Inc. She has research experience in human performance measurement, team dynamics and training, training design and evaluation, survey development, and both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. She holds a M.S. in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from San Diego State University, and a B.A. in Psychology from California State University San Marcos.

Communication Skills Development for Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs)

**Kara L. Orvis, Jessica Shenberger-Trujillo,
Kristy M. Kay, Krista A. Ratwani**
Aptima, Inc.
Woburn, MA
korvis@aptima.com,
jshenbergertrujillo@aptima.com,
kkav@antima.com

April D. Sanders
U.S. Army Research Institute
Fort Hood, TX
april.d.sanders9.civ@mail.mil

INTRODUCTION

As defined in the Army's leadership doctrine, leadership is a process of influencing others. One of the ways by which Army leaders exert influence is through effective communication (Department of the Army, 2015). Leader communication abilities (e.g., engaging communication techniques, demonstrating sensitivity to cultural factors in communication, encouraging open and candid communication) are central tenets of leader development to support Army readiness (FM 6-22, 2015). While military doctrine consistently highlights the importance of communication skills for all military leaders, top-level Army leaders continue articulating the importance of enhancing communication skills specifically in noncommissioned officers (NCOs; Qualls, 2016).

As "the backbone of the Army" NCOs are expected to communicate effectively in day-to-day duties. The Army NCO Corps consists of an extremely diverse population of individuals from all nations, cultures, languages, social and educational backgrounds. Effectively communicating with Soldiers, officers, and civilians is an essential skill for all NCOs, regardless of background. As NCOs progress through a career, the importance of communication skills increases. Junior Soldiers are generally required to engage in activities related to their job duty, which may or may not involve writing. When first promoted to junior NCO positions (e.g., Team Leaders and Squad Leaders) the primary means to effectively relay tasks down the chain of command, and communicate briefs and requests up the chain of command involve emails, memorandums, and occasionally counseling statements. As NCOs advance in rank and leadership, their communicative duties increase; mid-level NCOs are expected to effectively write counseling statements, awards, Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Reports (NCOERs), and disseminate information to a larger and often higher-ranking audience. Senior NCOs are expected to serve as exemplary models and mentors of effective communication strategies, leading communication training and counseling for junior and mid-level NCOs. Senior NCOs must effectively disseminate information and delegate tasks to their subordinate NCOs in a manner that is decipherable and can be further fed to junior-enlisted Soldiers. Senior NCOs are also likely to work in staff positions, which require more writing. At all levels, NCOs must be able to interpret and digest information and tasks, and provide relevant information to their subordinates. Army NCOs must also be able to summarize high level complex communications and adapt their missions in line with commander's intent. Specific duties and the trajectory of these duties may vary by MOS and unit; nonetheless, it is imperative to develop effective communication skills in NCOs early in their careers.

Research indicates that the Army could better assess and develop communication skills, particularly for mid-grade NCOs (SGT – SFC; Ward, 2018). Further, research has identified the need for development and assessment of particular types of communication skills. Surveys conducted by the Center for Army Leadership have documented a need for the development of NCOs' *interpersonal skills* to support their ability to lead and develop subordinates (Bailey, 2015). The NCO Senior Leader Survey and the Center for Army Leadership's Annual Survey of Army Leadership have pointed out a need for NCOs to be better prepared in the areas of *written* and *oral communication skills*. The surveys reported that writing is a particular challenge for many NCOs regardless of rank. Further, research has noted the need for tools and resources to support the development and assessment of communication skills, as well as on the job support for communication tasks. During Sergeant Major of the Army Dailey's "Not in My Squad" (NIMS) workshops, NCOs frequently expressed their desires for additional training and resources to improve and develop communication skills (Fite et al., 2018). Workshop attendees described communication skills as a top training need because of its impact on performance at all organizational levels.

The NCO 2020 Study (Kinney, Sieck, Killian, Stapp, Krondak, & Powell, 2014) highlighted the importance of building a Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) to better track the communication skillsets of NCOs. The key aims of the NCOES are to measure/identify gaps in NCO communication competencies and to provide instructional, self-development, and operational learning (Bailey, 2015). Because the key aim of the NCOPDS is to close gaps in NCO competencies and to provide a career map of relevant institutional, self-development, and operational learning TRADOC has addressed the need to focus on communication skills in several ways. The NCO Leadership Center of Excellence at Fort Bliss has developed Leader Core Competency curriculum to be taught within professional military education (PME) that is intended to shape learning outcomes associated with effective communication skills among mid-grade NCOs. This includes formal instructional blocks that cover written communication, public speaking, effective listening and military briefing techniques.

Although the Army is considering how to develop communication skills within the institutional setting, important for the growth and development of all Soldiers is complementing formal training and education with experiences in the operational and self-development domains (Department of the Army, 2017). By looking toward solutions that span the three training and education domains (institutional, operational, and self-development), the Army can integrate a focus on improved communication skills throughout an NCO's career. This focus on continuous learning experiences is consistent with the Army's Learning Concept for Training and Education (Department of the Army, 2017) where the right learning experiences must be occurring in a variety of settings as needs are identified. Thus, the Army must think about a model where NCOs receive training and have opportunities to practice communication skills in multiple environments and at an increased frequency.

To better develop communication skills in NCOs, research is required to investigate the specific interpersonal, written, and oral communication skills required by mid-grade NCOs for effective job performance. Further, systematic research should specify the extent and nature of NCO communication challenges, particularly from the perspective of time spent in garrison. Additionally, research is needed to identify the best methods for training these skills, and assessment and evaluation methodologies are required to empirically validate the methods identified.

Research Purpose

The primary technical objectives for this research are to investigate the following: (a) assess current oral and written communication skill proficiencies in NCOs across ranks of Sergeant to First Sergeant; (b) identify the institutional, operational, and self-development activities that support the development of oral and written communication skills, across the career of an enlisted Soldier; (c) investigate communication challenges related to communication technology, generational differences, and culture; and (d) identify and recommend assessment and instructional methods for improving written and oral communication skills in the NCO corps, within garrison.

METHOD

Data was collected in focus groups, ranging in size from five to 15 participants between May 2, 2018 and July 27, 2018. At the start of each session, researchers provided a high-level description of the research, obtained informed consent, and participants completed a questionnaire, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The researchers then conducted a semi-structured interview, lasting approximately 90 minutes. At the end of the session, participants were debriefed. Researchers took notes during the session and organized them by questions asked.

Participants

Data was collected with 235 Soldiers from four CONUS Army installations. Twenty were commissioned officers, 64 were enlisted Soldiers, 150 were noncommissioned officers, and 1 was a warrant officer (see Table 1). Seventy-one percent of participants ($n = 166$) had been deployed. On average, Soldiers had 35.27 months (2.94 years) in their current rank, and 16.86 months (1.41 years) in their current duty position. The average length of service was 102.49 months (8.54 years). Participants were recruited via Research Support Requests at FORSCOM installations ($n = 41$) or via Army NCO leadership courses (e.g., Basic Leaders Course, $n = 92$; Senior Leader Course, $n = 61$; and Advanced Leader Course, $n = 41$). Participants were mostly active duty, with the exception of 16 individuals who reported serving on the National Guard and eight individuals who reported serving on the Army Reserves.

All but 21 participants ($n = 214$) reported speaking English as their first language; 57 participants reported speaking an additional language. Most participants indicated that they preferred to speak English at home (87.6%), and speak English at home nearly all of the time (80%). The majority ($n = 209$) of participants reported the United States as their native country. Of all respondents, 214 attended school in the United States, 9 in a different native country, and 7 in a different country other than the United States or their native country. Additionally, 146 attended college in the United States, and 6 attended college in a different native country.

Table 1

Participant Classification and Rank

Classification	Rank	Frequency	Percent
Enlisted Soldier	PFC	3	1.3%
	CPL	13	5.5%
	SPC	48	20.4%
Warrant Officer	CW2	1	0.4%
Noncommissioned Officer	SGT	58	24.7%
	SSG	74	31.5%
	SFC	17	7.2%
	1SG	1	0.4%
Commissioned Officer	1LT	3	1.3%
	2LT	2	0.9%
	CPT	9	3.8%
	MAJ	6	2.6%
	Total	235	100%

Apparatus and Materials*Communications Questionnaire*

Participants completed a questionnaire that included (1) demographic questions, (2) perceived leader communication competency (general and task specific), (3) the most frequently used and most preferred channels of communication utilized by leaders, and (4) perceived barriers to communication.

Demographics. Participants were asked to provide information such as rank, time in rank, whether English was their second language, where they went to school, as well as if and how long they attended school outside of the U.S.

Leader's Communication Competence was assessed within the context of general aspects of communication (e.g., [my leader] is a good listener). Using a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to note the degree to which they strongly disagree (1) or strongly agree (5) with 33 statements about their leader and aspects of communication. Leader's communication competence also assesses Communication Competence of a participant's leader but within the context of specific tasks that require communication. Using a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to note how well their leader communicates (1=below expectations and 5=above expectations) for each of 17 tasks (e.g., teaching a collective level task). All Communication Competence items were developed specifically for this research following similar approaches found in the literature (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Spitzberg, 2007). The specific items referenced Army Doctrine, examples in the communications literature, and consultation with retired Army subject matter experts.

Communication Channel Use and Preference was assessed via self-report from participants on the most common channels of communication their leader uses (by rank ordering channels of communication by frequency of use) as well as their personal preferences for channels of communication (by marking their top three preferred channels of communication). The two items were created specifically for this research but were modeled after existing questionnaires regarding communication use and preferences.

Barriers to Communication were assessed using a five-point Likert scale. Participants were asked to note the extent to which they strongly agree (1) or strongly disagree (5) as to whether specific challenges to communication (individual and unit) are present in their organization. The 20 items were created for this research. The challenges asked about were identified via a review of common communication challenges found in the communications literature. This paper will highlight the questions related to cultural, language, and generational barriers.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

Researchers used a core set of questions for the focus group interviews which included questions about: (a) day-to-day activities that require communication skills, (b) specific communication challenges, (c) training activities for developing communication skills, and (d) getting feedback on specific tools used to improve communication skills. As focus groups took place, the research team revised and added focus group questions. All questions were within the context of NCO communication skills assessment, development, and challenges. Notes were taken and reviewed for analysis.

RESULTS

Communication Skill Proficiency

The semi-structured interview and survey data (communication competence subscales) were used to understand the level of communication skill proficiency in NCOs. Soldiers were asked to report the perceived competence of their leaders using three different measures. First, using a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to note the degree to which they agree with (1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree) 33 statements about their leader and aspects of communication. The average rating of communication competence across those 33 items was 3.88 ($SD = 0.83$), indicating a range of ratings from neutral to general agreement. Soldiers perceived average communication competence for their leader, with a degree of variability in those ratings. Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for each of the individual items.

Table 2

General Communication Competency Ratings

Item	Leader Rating	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Communicates well one on one.	4.13	1.00
Uses the appropriate channel of communication (e.g. text, face-to-face) given the topic being communicated.	4.07	1.00
Communicates well in small group settings.	4.07	1.00
Communicates well in informal settings.	4.02	1.02
Has effective verbal communication skills across various channels (conversation with individuals or groups, through electronic media, speech through telephone, radio, television or video conferencing).	3.98	1.07
Confirms critical information was received.	3.97	1.04
Communicates well in formal settings.	3.95	1.07
Has good enough communication skills to build meaningful and trusting relationships with his/her Soldiers.	3.94	1.11
Is able to develop accurate messages.	3.94	1.02
Is able to communicate their expertise.	3.92	1.04
Is able to communicate a clear vision of what their Soldiers need to do.	3.90	1.08
Communicates well in large group settings.	3.88	1.09
Uses efficient phrases.	3.87	0.95
Effectively communicates to all audiences.	3.87	1.10
Has effective nonverbal communication skills (use of eye contact, gestures, facial expressions).	3.86	0.97
Uses good vocabulary.	3.84	0.99
Has effective written communication skills across various channels (letters, newsletters, newspapers, emails, blogs, websites, social media, texting).	3.84	1.07
Provides effective and efficient information exchanges.	3.83	1.03
Provides good examples when explaining things.	3.83	1.05
Uses short, sensible sentences and paragraphs.	3.81	0.97
Communicates information at the right level of frequency to support mission effectiveness.	3.78	1.07
Communicates as a leader should.	3.76	1.11
Uses images well.	3.74	0.97
Is not available often enough to communicate what needs to be communicated.	3.73	1.11
Is a good listener.	3.72	1.22
Communicates information at the optimal time to support mission accomplishment.	3.68	1.07
Is too busy to communicate well.	3.68	1.13
Has difficulty developing clear messages.	3.62	1.23
Has difficulty developing concise messages.	3.64	1.22
Has difficulty developing timely messages.	3.60	1.24
Needs to develop better communication skills.	3.41	1.34
Knows when he/she is communicating poorly.	3.40	1.12

Note: Leader Assessment: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.83$, $\alpha = 0.98$; Self-Assessment: $M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.44$, $\alpha = 0.94$

Perceived communication competence was also assessed within the context of specific tasks that require communication. Using a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to note how well their leader communicates (1=Not at all effective, 2=Slightly effective, 3=Moderately effective, 4=Very effective, 5=Extremely effective) for each of 17 tasks commonly conducted by NCOs. The average rating for task-specific leader communication competence was ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.00$), indicating a range in responses as to whether they perceived communication competence for their leader. Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations for each of the individual items. Ratings were lower for certain writing tasks such as formal counseling documentation, evaluation reports, and awards.

Table 3

Task-Specific Communication Competency Averages and Standards Deviations Per Item

Item	Leader Rating	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Conducting a formal counseling session.	3.37	1.31
Writing supporting written documentation for a counseling session (e.g. Form 4856).	3.43	1.38
Conducting an informal mentoring session.	3.58	1.31
Completing a NCO evaluation report.	3.27	1.55
Conducting a Leader Professional Development session.	3.32	1.41
Writing up a form for award recommendation (e.g., Form DA 638).	3.37	1.50
Conducting an After Action Review (AAR).	3.57	1.34
Requesting resources for training.	3.60	1.41
Teaching a specific individual level task.	3.58	1.36
Teaching a collective level task.	3.58	1.37
Conducting corrective action.	3.51	1.38
Communicating daily tasks, duties, and responsibilities.	3.77	1.17
Providing a back brief to their leadership.	3.74	1.31
Building relationships with subordinates.	3.70	1.34
Building relationships with superiors.	3.76	1.32

Note: Leader Assessment: $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.00$, $\alpha = 0.95$; Self-Assessment: $M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.44$, $\alpha = 0.91$

Data collected through semi-structured interviews supported the questionnaire findings. In the interviews, Soldiers indicated they felt less confident about their ability to perform specific written tasks and felt more confident in their ability to communicate orally regarding training and taskings.

Channels of Communication and Use of Technology

The semi-structured interview and survey data (Communication Channel Use and Preference Items) were used to understand the preferences for communication channels, as well as challenges associated with technology. A common assumption made by senior leaders is that the introduction of the phone and texting applications impacts Soldiers' preferred channel of communication. Table 4 presents which channels of communication are most commonly used by leaders. Table 5 presents which channels of communication the participant prefers their leader would use. The use of communication channels was well aligned in which leaders were meeting their subordinate's preference on channel of communication use. Participants noted that their leaders most often used face-to-face, phone, and text communications. These were also the top three modes of communications that Soldiers preferred their leaders to use.

In both the semi-structured interviews and the survey data, participants indicated face-to-face, phone, and text as the primary channels of communication. There were some MOSs and staff positions in which e-mail was commonly used but generally speaking, the combat oriented MOSs did not have easy access to computers, and thus it was less common. Additionally, although social media was not a common communication channel for active military, it was for the Reserve and National Guard participants. Other communication applications like "WhatsApp" were more commonly used during deployments.

Group texts were commonly used by leaders at all levels to disseminate information. Common group text messages would include formation times and what uniforms to wear. They reported texts were particularly useful for last minute tasking and information. Some reported it was different than "in the old days" when they would have to locate their unit members in person or by calling around.

Many leaders reported multiple running group texts. For example, a Squad Leader may have three group texts: (a) for the Squad; (b) for all Squad Leaders; and (c) for their Company leadership. NCOs reported having between one up to twelve different group texts. Participants noted the group chats could be frustrating in that they were used for socializing (e.g., posting memes, jokes, etc.) as well as work-related communications. Some leaders reported feeling

uncomfortable regarding the content of their Soldiers' posting in group texts. They also noted the amount of personal content in group texts made it difficult to locate mission-essential information. However, other participants noted the sharing of social content was a useful way to build cohesion within the group.

Semi-structured interview data indicated that texting was a common way leaders disseminate information (e.g. what to wear and where to be) but it did not replace face-to-face communications, which was reported to be important for every MOS. Participants also noted the importance of using the right channel of communication based on the message. Participants indicated that people generally made good use of the communication channels. For example, they would not share bad news over a text. Instead, they would use text to organize a time and place to meet with a Soldier to discuss the bad news.

Finally, the majority of Soldiers used their personal phones for work. Few Soldiers were issued government phones. All participants reported paying for their personal phones and service.

Table 5

Most Frequently Used Channels of Communication by Leaders

Ranking	Channel of Communication															
	Face-to-Face		Phone (Voice)		Text		Email		Mobile App		Online Videos		Social Media		Formal Paper Letters	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1 (Most)	117	49.8	10	4.3	87	37	17	7.2	10	4.3	0	0	0	0	1	0.4
2	54	23	56	23.8	80	34	33	14	3	1.3	1	0.4	2	0.9	2	0.9
3	43	18.3	98	41.7	37	15.7	39	16.6	3	1.3	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.4
4 (Least)	14	6	46	19.6	20	8.5	102	43.4	10	4.3	0	0	8	3.4	4	1.7
N/A	7	2.9	25	10.6	11	4.8	44	18.8	209	88.8	234	99.6	224	95.3	227	96.6
Total	235	100	235	100	235	100	235	100	235	100	235	100	235	100	235	100

Table 6

Most Preferred Channel for Leader Communication

	Face-to-Face		Phone (voice)		Text	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Top 3 Preferred	225	95.0	197	84.0	200	85.1
Not Top 3 Preferred	7	3.0	35	5.0	32	13.6
Missing	3	2.0	3	11.0	3	1.3

Individual Differences and Communication Challenges

Both the semi-structured interview and survey data were used to understand the degree to which individual differences impact communication challenges. Specifically, challenges originating from language, generational, and cultural differences.

Language Barriers

Soldiers were asked to note the extent to which they agreed with whether they experienced language barriers in their Company (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). Results (Table 7, item 1) indicated agreement that they did experience language barriers ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.95$). The interviews shed more light on this response. During the interviews, Soldiers indicated most ESL Soldiers spoke English well and the researchers observed the same in the

10% of the sample that identified as ESL. Although participants reported most ESL Soldiers spoke English well, most Soldiers could recount a time when they worked with someone who had a thick accent or whose English skills were still developing. This seemed to be most problematic when talking on the radio as that mode of communication could add to the difficulty in understanding an accent. It was less problematic via written modes of communication like text and email. Importantly, the general consensus among participants was that they were almost always able to work around the language or accent barrier by either asking for a different mode of communication, asking for clarification, or over time they began to understand the person better. There was some indication that Soldiers were more likely to ask for clarification when talking with peers and subordinates, whereas they were less likely to ask for clarification when talking with their leaders. Generally, Soldiers reported language barriers were not a common communication challenge.

Generational Differences

Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed that generational differences impacted communication in their Company (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree). Results (Table 7, item 2) indicated mixed opinions on this item ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.07$); this was the case during the interviews as well. Some participants reported there were significant challenges in both mode of communication preferences (e.g., younger Soldiers preferred text over face-to-face communications) as well as interpersonal differences (e.g., participants reported that younger generations frequently asked “why” when given directions). Other participants indicated generational differences were minor and superseded by the Army culture and norms. The interview data noted similar disparate responses to the presence of stereotypical generational differences. Some participants reported that they preferred to communicate via technology, but many others indicated liking face-to-face communication. This was supported by the communication channel preference data as well. Some interview participants noted the degree of comfort younger Soldiers had with technology. However, similar comments were made by other participants regarding the comfort level of their older Soldiers with technology. Based on researcher observations, and confirmation by many Soldiers, there was little evidence that generational differences has any meaningful impact on communications. Communication preferences seemed to be based more on individual differences than generational differences.

Cultural Differences

In the questionnaire, participants indicated agreement that cultural differences did not impact interpersonal communications (Table 7, item 3; $M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.97$). This was supported by the interview data. Soldiers indicated that they are used to working with people coming different backgrounds, whether they be regional or cultural. There was a general acceptance and expectation that people will be different from each other in the Army. Participants reported cultural differences did not impact their ability to communicate with each other to accomplish their mission.

Table 7

Impact of Language, Generational, And Cultural Differences

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. In my Company, we experience language barriers.	3.99	0.95
2. Generational differences in my Company impact good communication.	3.43	1.07
3. Cultural differences in my Company influence interpersonal communications.	2.14	0.97

Communication Skills Development over an NCO’s Career

During the semi-structured interview sessions, participants were asked to describe how communication skills developed over the course of an NCOs career. For the most part, the only formal curriculum they received on writing skills was through their formal leadership courses (Basic Leadership Course (BLC), Senior Leadership Course (SLC), and Advance Leadership Course (ALC)). However, Soldiers noted that their formal coursework was focused on APA and other scientific/formal approaches to writing. Many participants felt they were better served learning Army writing skills for specific documents (e.g. counseling statements) within the context of those courses.

Many Soldiers reported having taken English composition college level courses while in the Army. The majority of Soldiers indicated these courses were helpful in developing their writing skills.

In all cases, Soldiers acknowledged that the majority of oral, written, and interpersonal skill development happens on the job, in home station, usually through direction and guidance from senior leaders or senior staff. While in home station, Soldiers reported having many on the job experiences to practice and learn oral communication skills. From early in their careers, they are asked to speak to others on a regular basis, for example, while running physical training sessions. In contrast, they receive very little opportunity to practice and learn writing skills. Essentially, Soldiers reported that they come into the Army from their High School writing curriculum, which they noted can vary in terms of quality. Soldiers then complete Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) where most MOSs receive no instruction on writing. Following AIT, Soldiers join their unit. In combat arms MOSs, it is highly likely that Soldiers will not engage in any significant writing tasks for four or five years. Soldiers reported that this leads to writing skill decay for whatever skills they may have developed during their K-12 education. Other MOSs (i.e., military police, medical) naturally have writing tasks as part of their job from the very beginning and reported have less skill decay.

Given that the majority of communication skill development happens on the job, we asked questions to understand the variability of those developmental experiences. Most participants reported getting some kind of feedback on their oral and written communication skills while in home station. In some cases, the instruction was minor and might take the form of a spot correction, when someone above them or in the same grade/position would pull them aside and say “that was a little harsh” or “you could have done that differently.” In other cases, a leader might give them significant developmental assignments and substantial feedback. For example, on Soldier spoke about a leader that had him practice writing 30 counseling statements, which he would redline and return to the Soldier to fix. Many participants noted that they learned on the job through observational means. Soldiers model (or do not want to model) examples they see every day. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, it became clear that there was a great deal of variability as to how much on the job coaching Soldiers experience in the development of communication skills (oral, written, and interpersonal). This was particularly true for writing and interpersonal communication skills.

Written Communication Skill Challenges and Training Recommendations

Both interview and survey data identified writing skill development as a major challenge for NCOs. As a result of self-selection and differences in K-12 education, Soldiers enter the Army with very different levels of writing skills. Additionally, for many MOSs, the written communication skills that Soldiers possess when entering the Army decay over time as writing skills are not used (e.g., those in Combat MOSs have very little writing responsibilities for the first several years of their Army Career). When Soldiers move into leadership positions, they have little to no training (formal or informal) on how to write Army-specific documents, and hence cannot do so effectively when needed. Finally, the variability in mentorship in writing is great, and Soldiers do not know about existing resources to develop writing skills.

During the interviews, Soldiers reported that solutions to help them learn writing skills on the job would be beneficial. They indicated that these solutions could be tailored to Soldiers learning the skills or for leaders who are tasked with teaching their Soldiers how to develop these skills. Importantly, they also noted that it is imperative that any solutions would need to fit in with their daily duties and not require extra outside training time that took away from their jobs. We present a few possible options discussed with Soldiers.

Soldiers indicated that their leaders often gave them examples to use when developing specific documents such as an NCOER. When Soldiers did not receive examples from their leaders, they often used a search engine to find examples. Other leaders noted this practice as problematic because the examples found online were not always sufficient to the current needs of the Army. One training solution would be to develop/identify relevant and irrelevant examples of Army-specific documents that Soldiers can review and identify the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Leaders play a critical role helping to develop writing skills on the job. There are many who step up to the task and help junior leaders by providing them with practice and feedback on writing Army documents. However, leaders may or may not know how to help develop writing skills. Additionally, they may or may not be good writers

themselves. Any resources that would help them in that training task would be beneficial. As an example, senior NCOs may benefit from a guide on how to provide effective feedback to Soldiers on their writing, including being able to point Soldiers to other resources. Another idea would be to develop a Sergeant's time module for mid- and low-level NCOs covering a broad range of communication material that allows for practice writing and how to provide relevant feedback (brief weekly sessions).

There are also things the Army could do at higher levels. For example, Soldiers indicated their knowledge of writing resources are limited although they know some are available. The Army could develop a central repository that contains useful writing resources easily accessible by all Soldiers. The Army could also require/encourage courses in English composition (e.g., English 101 college-level writing course) prior to Soldiers making certain ranks, or taking certain courses. In the interviews, almost every Soldier who took an English composition course found it to improve their writing skills. It might also benefit the Army to develop a structured Self-Development Course that requires/focuses on writing. Soldiers reported there is no such curriculum in required distributed courses. It should be noted that these Soldiers may not have benefitted from recent changes to the NCOAA to improve writing skills, among other things. Currently, prior to attending school house training, Soldiers are assigned 40 hours of instruction to be completed, including basic grammar and composition. Army leadership can continue to encourage the communication skill development within their footprint by making it a focus of training. By understanding that improving overall communication skills has the potential to improve a Soldier's overall ability to think more critically, be more cognitively agile, problem-solve more creatively, and perform their missions more capably.

DISCUSSION

There is a great deal of variability in communication skills ratings for leaders (for oral, written, and interpersonal skills). Soldiers perceived average communication competence for their leader, indicating that there is room for improvement. Soldiers perceived leaders to have higher general communication competence compared with task-specific communication competency. Average scores on task-specific communication competencies were lower, and variability among responses was about 30-50% greater than for general communication competencies. The variability of communication competence for specific tasks was supported by both the survey and interview data.

Currently, apart from NCOES course curriculum, communication skills are largely developed on the job by mentoring via senior leaders. Additionally, Soldiers are unfamiliar or unaware of resources currently available to them that could support their writing skills and effectiveness. In combat-oriented MOSs, this is usually after a number of years in which skills can decay, particularly for writing. This is in part due to the variability of skills upon entering the Army, the development of those skills over time (or lack thereof), and lack of formal Army training. Dependency on leaders to train these skills results in variable learning experiences, particularly when leaders themselves may be struggling.

Language and accent barriers, and cultural differences were identified as uncommon or unsubstantial communication challenges in interviews. Although Soldiers tended to agree that they experience some language barriers within their company, there was substantial variability in these responses. Some generational differences were reported, but the impact was small and superseded by the Army culture and norms. Overall, these factors may be communication challenges at times and/or in some Companies, but results from the current study could not conclude that they are regular or consistent barriers.

Channels of communication vary among Soldiers, leaders, and units, with a wide range of mediums in use. In general, communication channels used by leaders and those preferred by subordinates were aligned, despite the variety of mediums in use. Specifically, the top three preferred mediums of communication were face-to-face, phone (voice), and text. These three were most frequently ranked among the most commonly used mediums of communication, indicating no gap between preferred and actual communication modes. Most Soldiers generally ranked face-to-face communication as most frequently used, followed by phone (voice), then text, and email least often used. Few Soldiers included mobile applications, online videos, social media, or formal paper letters in their rankings. It seems that within MOSs, norms and expectations are relatively clear with regard to communication mediums and frequency.

Soldiers reported more of a concern about the development of writing skills than oral or interpersonal skills. Soldiers and leaders indicated they feel less confident with writing tasks, and more confident orally communicating taskings and trainings. Therefore, we emphasize training recommendations on writing skill development. Training recommendations for writing were collected from Soldiers. Soldiers requested additional writing skill development,

whether that come from new courses or by augmenting current courses (e.g., BLC, ALC, etc.). Soldiers expressed a concern for a lack of transferable skills when it comes to written communication, and thus recommended developing Soldiers in methods other than strictly Army writing, or writing for highly-specific documents. Feedback and mentoring from leaders and/or experienced colleagues was suggested, so long as those providing feedback are trained on how to do so effectively. Among useful activities that could be done with such a mentor, Soldiers recommended involving junior NCOs in the process of writing, reviewing, and editing reports. Other developmental tasks included writing exercises, Sergeants time training, exposure to reports (e.g., good versus bad examples), and direction in writing reports (such as a writing guide and/or checklist).

Literature indicates that a highly effective method for training writing skills is through involved mentorship and deliberate practice (Kellogg, 2008). Although many of the Soldier-recommended trainings for improving written communication involve formal classroom learning, the importance of leader guidance and regular practice should not be underwritten. Training programs that involve formal instruction, regular counseling, and developmental exercises incorporated into Soldiers' daily lives will likely lead to the greatest developmental trajectory in written communication skills.

Because the majority of communication skills are currently learned on the job, despite little formal training, the development of writing skills is a challenge that should be addressed using developmental tools and resources that Soldiers can employ throughout their daily duties. There is a need for on-the-job training solutions that are simple and fit into regular work activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was initiated and supported by Dr. Liston Bailey, Senior Learning Analyst of the Learning Enterprise Division G-3/7 Training and Leader Development Directorate. We have also appreciated the full support of the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence, USASMA, and NCOAs, specifically Ft. Carson and Ft. Hood, where multiple data collections were held. The assistance, insight, and feedback from all involved have been invaluable and we would like to especially thank CSM Jimmy Sellers, Mr. William Ogletree, and CSM Lowell "Dan" Churchman for their ongoing guidance.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, L. (2015). *Building the new NCO professional*. Army University Press. Found June 2019 at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2015-Online-Exclusive-Articles/NCO-Professional/>
- Crissman, D. (2013). Improving the leader development experience in Army units. *Military Review*, 6-16. United States Army War College, Pennsylvania.
- Department of the Army (2012a). *Army Leadership*, (Army Doctrine Publication 6-22). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Department of the Army (2012b). *Training Units and Developing Leaders*, (Army Doctrine Reference Publication 7-0). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Department of the Army (2014). *The Counseling Process*, (Army Training Publication 6-22.1). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Department of the Army (2015). *Leader Development*, (Field Manual 6-22). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Department of the Army (2017). *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, (Army Regulation 600- 100). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.

- Department of the Army (2017). *Army Training and Leader Development* (Army Regulation 350-1). Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army.
- Fite, J. E., Key-Roberts, M. J., Crabb, B. T., Foo, H. S., Jiménez-Rodríguez, M., Kurinec, C. A., DeCoster, B. D., Stewart, D. L., and Jackson, D. (2018). *Center for the Army Profession and Ethic Sergeant Major of the Army's Not In My Squad Initiative: Working Group Protocol for Army Research Institute Facilitators* (ARI Research Report 2018-08). Fort Belvoir, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences.
- Kellogg, R.T. (2008). *Training writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective*. *Journal of writing research*, 1(1), 1-26
- Kinney, P., Sieck, S., Killian, D., Stapp, M., Kronzak, S., & Powell, D. (2014). Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) 2020 Survey Final Results, TRAC-W-TM-14-027. TRADOC Analysis Center, NM.
- Qualls, G. (2016). *NCO Writing Excellence Program Aims to Tune up Communication Skills*. *NCO Journal*. Found June 2019 at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2016/June/NCO-Writing-Excellence-Program-Aims-to-Tune-up-Communication-Skills/>
- Riley, R., Hatfield, J., Freeman, T., Fallesen, J., & Gunther, K. (2014). 2013 CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Main Findings Technical Report 2014-1. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership.
- Ward, D. (2018). *The Art of Words: Professional Writing Through the Ranks*. Army University Press. Found June 2019 at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2018/February/Art-of-Words/>