



Going Beyond Your Foxhole:

*An Interview With
Command Sgt. Maj. Rodger
Mansker*

■ By Arpi Dilanian and Matthew Howard



Command Sgt. Maj. Rodger Mansker receives an explosive ordnance disposal capabilities briefing during a visit to the 8th Theater Sustainment Command in Hawaii on Jan. 11, 2018. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michael Behlin)

The Army's senior
enlisted logistician
shares his thoughts
on talent management
and developing future
leaders in logistics.

Command Sgt. Maj. Rodger Mansker, the Army's senior enlisted logistician, is known for his focus on quality of life and training for Soldiers. Since enlisting in 1985, he has experienced deployments to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. His career is culminating with his current assignment as command sergeant major of the Army Materiel Command. He sat down with us to share his thoughts on talent management and developing future leaders in logistics.

How has the Army's approach to talent management evolved throughout your 32-year career?

Early in my career, the Army was very much focused on military occupational specialties (MOSs)—proficiency in a particular specialty and the corresponding positions throughout that career path. Now the Army has gone more toward understanding all career fields.

As we're supporting the Army, especially as logisticians, understanding functional areas outside our own MOSs is critically important. Knowing how [other] MOSs operate allows us to be more predictive in how we support them in the field.

This understanding also allows us to work more cohesively as a team and to broaden and diversify more than we ever have. And we're gaining that knowledge much earlier so we can really create Soldiers who are multifunctional and multicapable in all formations as they rise through the ranks. We're really trying to get away from being so stovepiped and parochial, and we're doing a much better job than when I came in. Data, and access to it, has helped spread that knowledge and understanding across career fields.

What aspects of talent management are you and Gen. Gus Perna working to influence?

Gen. Perna and I believe in the exact same thing: unselfish leadership

and allowing Soldiers go to grow. We don't always want to use our best and most talented Soldiers exclusively. We need to let them go and experience other things. Selfish leadership is holding on to your best until you're gone and not worrying about their careers, promotions, or proficiencies in other areas.

We are focused on managing talent and getting people in the right places at the right times in their career paths. I'm a big believer in maximizing talent and potential and assigning Soldiers to positions that are most challenging. We cannot grow by doing things we have already mastered.

We now take Soldiers and determine what their knowledge, skills, and abilities are, what they're potential is, and then assign them to ensure we are managing talent in the best way possible. The Integrated Personnel and Pay System—Army (IPPS—A) will be coming online within the next year or so. It's going to give us even more understanding of Soldiers and their skills, especially of National Guard and Reserve Soldiers and what they do in their civilian lives. IPPS—A will help us maximize the use of those skill sets as well.

How is the Army enabling senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) for mission success in complex and rapidly changing environments?

Recently, TRADOC [the Training and Doctrine Command] established the NCO Professional Development System. While the old system, the NCO Education System, was just training and educating, the new system links self-development, the operational domain, and the institutional domain together. And the domains are nested to maximize the time in each. So now we see the connective tissue in how we're growing people, and it's progressive growth.

When you take a self-learning module and then go into the institutional domain, there's connection there. You're progressively learning and you have a greater understand-



The Army Materiel Command's senior enlisted Soldier, Command Sgt. Maj. Rodger Mansker, listens to a briefing during a visit to the 8th Theater Sustainment Command on Jan. 11, 2018. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michael Behlin)

ing, so we don't have the seams or gaps that we used to have between domains.

As the Army's senior enlisted logistician, I work hard on diversifying and broadening Soldiers and doing so earlier on. We should not wait until Soldiers reach master sergeant or sergeant major to start cultivating that understanding of the enterprise, strategic, and operational levels. We need them to be great at their MOSs, but along the way, we have to grow them exponentially. We have to do it iteratively, and we can't do it all in one school. It has to be done progressively throughout the schools.

TRADOC recently established the Master Leader Course, which targets master sergeants. We had a gap at that level because previously we did not have a school for Soldiers moving from sergeant first class to sergeant major. But there are some key leadership positions at the master sergeant level, and that's really where we want to grow our leaders.

We should broaden and diversify them then so they have a better understanding when they become sergeants major and are in charge of something functional with multiple MOSs in their formations.

What is some of the feedback you have received on how Soldiers perceive their careers are being managed?

My perception of younger Soldiers is that they see the career path, but they don't fully understand it. There are a lot of positions out there they don't understand, and they don't understand how to get there. As you become more senior, obviously those positions become more known and well-understood, but I would offer that we are a little late at times in having that understanding.

Access to data, or knowledge, does not equal understanding. It's critical for us as senior leaders to really explain that career path and career mapping to younger Soldiers so they

know how to get there, why they need to get there, and what skills it will take. We owe that to them.

Leader development is critical for building readiness. What is your philosophy on leadership?

Leader development must be progressive, and I always talk mission command. Mission command is the art of leading through others. It's about providing guidance and intent and holding Soldiers accountable, but never abdicating your responsibility as the leader.

It's also understanding that mistakes may happen as we empower others. Obviously we don't allow mistakes that put people at risk, but mistakes foster growth as well; you learn from your mistakes as well as your successes.

I think all senior leaders owe it to every Soldier to develop them as leaders through mentoring and coaching. Leader development does



The Army Materiel Command's Command Sgt. Maj. Rodger Mansker visits the 8th Theater Sustainment Command on Jan. 11, 2018. The visit included a tour of the Logistics Support Vessel-2 CW3 Harold C. Clinger. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Michael Behlin)

not start when a Soldier is a sergeant; it starts way before that. We have to teach Soldiers both the disciplines—how to lead, but also how not to lead.

What role do mentorship and leader development play in managing the Army's talent?

First, I think we have to clarify the difference between a mentor and a coach. I constantly talk to NCOs about this, asking who their mentor is. I often find the person they are referring to is really their coach.

A coach is generally inside your functional area, your MOS, and typically your career path. A mentor, however, is someone who is able to tell you what you need to do, whether it's continuing as you are or doing things differently than you're used to. Often we're too comfortable talking to people we know or people we're familiar with, but somebody has to be able to teach you the other side of the career path, which is skills, leadership, and how you're perceived.

A mentor really rounds you out from different angles and develops your leadership skills. And your mentor has to change as you progress through your career, as you become more successful and rise through the ranks into positions of increased responsibility. A mentor who has never been in the position you're in, or about to be in, can offer very little.

My mentors are all retired. I'll tell you they are not logisticians; both of my senior mentors are in the combat arms field. I think that I know logistics pretty well; it's the stuff outside of that sustainment lens where those mentors really come in and make a difference.

They're able to tell me how other functional areas work, how I'm perceived, and how to operate at the higher echelons because they retired at the Army command level. Leaders are the difference in our great Army, so taking advantage of their knowledge and experience through mentoring is critical.

From being a mechanic to shaping policy at the Pentagon, how has your broad range of jobs affected your development?

If I had taken the path I thought my career should've gone, I would not have been afforded the opportunities that I've had to really broaden myself. I never would've guessed this path that I've actually taken.

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Spending time in the Pentagon broadened me in areas that I did not know were my weaknesses. It taught me the effects that policies and decisions have across the entire Army. Some things that I maybe would've complained about earlier in my career, I now understand why they're done and how to make them happen.

I personally have a thirst for knowledge and have had, and continue to have, great leaders guiding me in my career. So I often tell people they should always learn more, to keep learning and asking for more. Back when I was a sergeant first class and master sergeant, I would argue that I was successful, but the reality is I could've been much better had I known what I know now.

How do we get that knowledge and understanding earlier? I coach young logisticians on just that. Once you've mastered the skill and understanding of your own MOS, you also have to understand the people around you that enable you. If you are an ordnance person, you should know transportation, you should know quartermaster. You should know them because eventually you are going to have a formation that has all of those functional areas in it as well as

human resources and finance.

While I'm ordnance proud and could still be considered ordnance, I'm not truly ordnance anymore. In my view, I have not been ordnance since about the sergeant first class level. And it's the career path I took that has guided me to this point of understanding beyond just ordnance.

Don't be afraid of uncomfortable areas, of formations that don't neces-

sarily fit your career path, as long as you're growing in every one of them. The critical part is performance. Obviously, knowledge and understanding of your MOS is important, but do those extra things. Go be a drill sergeant; go be a recruiter; go be an instructor, or observer-coach/trainer. Those are all positions that will broaden you and help you see where you need to grow.

If you think you're going to be a mechanic your whole career, think again. To that young logistician today, I would offer the importance of going beyond your own MOS's foxhole and really understanding the broader career field you fit into and the network of functional areas you both support and are enabled by.

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