

The Master Sergeant Watershed

A Practical Guide for Supervisors of the Enlisted Corps' Critical Stripe

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As MSgt Smith¹ sat in front of me with his arms crossed and a deep scowl lining his face, I wondered how this great NCO had turned so sour so quickly. As a TSgt, he'd been an unqualified success story in every sense of the word, from his selection as one of the Twelve Outstanding Airmen of the Year to his recent STEP promotion; he was the cream of the crop. Everyone liked him, looked up to him, and knew his many laurels were well deserved. Pleased with his success and confident in his potential, I had personally moved him to a management position, and now he was miserable ... and I felt personally responsible. Within a year, he would retire from active duty. How did we arrive at this point?

We got here because of something that happens every day in the military, as our people (officer, enlisted and civilian) work hard and succeed, and then many are eventually promoted one step beyond where they are most effective. The world of business has recognized this for years, and especially since 1969, when Dr. Lawrence J. Peter published *The Peter Principle*. This maxim essentially states that “employees within an organization will advance to their highest level of competence and then be promoted to and remain at a level at which they are incompetent.”²

Within the Air Force enlisted corps, it's my experience that the rank of MSgt represents this watershed point for a great number our NCOs. Those who adapt succeed, while those who don't emerge as living testimonies to the “Peter Principle,” and can present significant challenges for their leaders and followers alike.

Why MSgt? For starters, MSgt marks the point at which many NCOs are introduced to junior officer supervisors, the majority of whom unfortunately get little training in even the basic points of enlisted professional development. Moreover, our enlisted force structure has long recognized E-7 as the first “manager” grade; one that “carries significantly increased responsibilities and requires a broad technical and managerial perspective.”³ It's also a grade that is eminently reachable for most competent and conscientious NCOs, including those with little managerial impulse or acumen, due to the way they're promoted up to this rank under the Weighted Airmen Promotion System. As long as an NCO is productive, proficient, and studious, he should be able to become a MSgt—a rank at which he will find himself facing a very different set of duties and expectations than he's been accustomed to. Even so, we're surprised when our once-stellar NCOs stumble through this transition, and some of them never seem to recover their erstwhile greatness.

Four Levels of Professional Maturity

I've found that, generally speaking, senior NCOs fall into four loosely defined levels of professional maturity—from those who seemingly cannot or will not adapt, to those who ultimately succeed and thrive.

1. At **Level 1** are the “TSgts in MSgt Stripes.” At this level, the NCO may be receiving E-7 pay, and even have taken over an E-7 job, but can’t seem to accept his new responsibilities. For example, he may be the chief of a maintenance shop, but can’t comprehend why you’d expect him to take responsibility for the success of his programs or his people. When his programs inevitably fall short, he tries to “pass the buck” along to his subordinates. He fails to recognize the systemic leadership issues at play when his people don’t seem motivated to strive for excellence, because in his mind he’s responsible only for his own actions. In a sense, he longs to return to “super technician” status, though he rather likes the respect and the pay he gets with the stripes. In some cases, under patient mentoring and driven by his own determination to achieve, he may progress quickly to **Level 2**.

2. This level is really the watershed step, and is actually the entry point for the average senior NCO. She comes into her new rank and position with enthusiasm and a willingness to attack her new responsibilities, but is unclear about what those are, and isn’t quite prepared to accept some of the demands placed upon her. Not wanting to burn any bridges, she may take on many of these responsibilities at the beginning, but they seem to grow faster than her capacity to process them—especially since she still feels that to do them right she must do them herself. To complicate matters, she’s expected to quickly finish her associate’s degree and her Senior NCO Academy by correspondence just to stay competitive. Meanwhile, she sees her troops doing the “real” work, and may start feeling like her new world of reports, briefings and meetings is a waste of her time and her talents. Feeling overwhelmed, she may start to push back at some of her taskings, as well as many of the “good-citizen” functions (such as Top 3), which seem extraneous anyway. If she’s willing, well prepared and well mentored, she’ll adapt and overcome. If not, she’ll gradually slide backward into Level 1.

3. Many, however, do overcome, and they progress into **Level 3**. This level of MSgt has started to get the feel of his new surroundings, and has found that leadership agrees with him. He’s begun to see how, through conscientious management and mentorship, he can fundamentally improve the mission and motivate his people to succeed. Whether it’s upgrade and ancillary training, safety and security, or EPRs and decorations, he makes sure the trains run on time. He begins to get a vision of where he wants to take his work center beyond the status quo, and he learns to survive the disappointments when his big ideas need to be scaled back or redirected. He’s better at delegating his to-do list and trusting his people, but now the list is growing with improvements *he* wants to make. At this point, he may suffer from tunnel vision where his shop is concerned, and he may still look at those good-citizen functions as distractions (but necessary evils to get the Chief off his back), but overall he’s well on his way to achieving **Level 4**.

4. At this highest level of development, a senior NCO is fully comfortable with being the boss, and feels like she’s got her folks moving in the right direction. Now she begins to look around and ask new questions. She starts to see ways that

she can impact the unit, its mission and its people beyond the scope of her shop. Where she used to say, “I can’t do anything about that, it’s off my scope,” now she begins to examine how she can collaborate with other work centers to achieve larger goals. Mentorship becomes a moral imperative and a way of life, encompassing airmen, NCOs and even junior officers. Despite this, she sees a hundred new things she still needs to learn, and covets that knowledge so that she can maximize her effectiveness.

These levels may be sequential, but by no means is that necessarily the case. For example, many well-prepared MSgts skip Level 1 entirely, and some even skip Level 2. On the other hand, many start at Level 2 and then regress to Level 1, as they grow disillusioned and frustrated with the expectations of their position, longing instead for the relative simplicity and sense of technical competency they felt as a junior NCO.

Neither is this list intended to be comprehensive and exhaustive. For example, a group commander has suggested to me that there also exists a Level 2A: the MSgt who misinterprets the urgings of the command chief and decides that the way to promotion involves performing a host of unit support and community service leadership roles to the neglect of his primary duties. This is certainly a fair observation, and illustrates the difficulty of categorizing people, each of whom is unique in his or her attributes. For this reason, we should use a concept like this as a way to organize thinking about the challenges of maturity rather than as a rigid system of labels, which people by nature will be sure to defy.

The Supervisory Toolbox

Still, by being aware of where our folks fit on the continuum, we can start the process of tailoring their roles, responsibilities, and our feedback accordingly, in order to position them for success. [If this echoes of the Situational Leadership model⁴ many of us studied in PME, it’s fair to say they share a common premise.] Methods for gauging potential and encouraging our people up the ladder are legion, but there are a few tried and sure techniques to start with: (1) self-education, (2) records review, (3) performance feedback, and (4) presenting appropriate challenges.

Educate thyself. This step is especially important to my junior officer colleagues. If you don’t yet understand how senior NCOs are trained and promoted (the roles of PME, CCAF, the Senior Rater, stratification, etc.) find yourself a qualified mentor and ask him to explain it to you. [Hint: most CMSgts are more than happy to do this with you.] Even better, ask him to guide you through a review of your subordinates’ records.

Records review. This is a must! Going over your troop’s record of performance tells you a lot about her, and gives you a baseline of what her capabilities and expectations are. Knowing whether the MSgt has “filled her squares” for promotion and has consistent Senior Rater indorsements is critical to understanding her expectations, and lets her know that you’re interested in her development. It can be just as helpful to know who is not expecting to make Chief as who is, and it gives you the information to conduct an informed initial feedback.

Feedback. There is a temptation to treat feedback as a program for junior personnel, or as a block-filler for EPRs. Don't fall into this mindset, and neglect the initial feedback. Ask your MSgt about her personal, educational and professional goals. Challenge her to develop goals for her work center. And ask her what she needs from you as her supervisor. Then, during follow-up sessions, you can discuss her progress towards these goals, and whether they need to be fine-tuned.

Together, records review and initial feedback combine to lay indispensable groundwork for the long term. For example, I once worked very hard to help a brand-new Level 2 MSgt grow and excel. After nearly 2 years of supervision, I was stunned to learn that he'd never enrolled himself in the Senior NCO Academy correspondence course, thereby eliminating himself from consideration for the Senior Rater's indorsement. A simple records review and more comprehensive initial feedback would have brought this issue to light long before, and would have set the stage for me to challenge him toward more immediate and appropriate goals.

Appropriate challenge. You want to develop "stretch" goals for your people to strive for, but here's where careful judgment becomes critical. You want them to grow, of course, but not everyone starts at the same place. A Level 1 MSgt is probably not interested in trying to become the Senior NCO of the Quarter, while the Level 2 troop may feel too overwhelmed to think about it yet. On the other hand, the Level 3 guy may already have a sense of what goals he wants to pursue, and just needs you to help him focus or validate them, while one who's reaching Level 4 probably requires little from you besides a sounding board and some "top-cover." Learning to recognize these developmental differences in MSgt leadership maturity is critical to our supervisory success, and ultimately to our mission success. This awareness keeps us from stumbling through a one-size-fits-all leadership style that confuses the unprepared and stifles our best performers.

Applying the Model

For example, upon arriving in a new leadership position, reviewing the records and interviewing the MSgts who reported to me, I became aware of several problems. MSgt Bolton was a Level 3 guy with a strong record of performance. He had struggled under the oppressive micromanagement of my predecessor, who apparently had been intimidated by his strong personality. Meanwhile, MSgt Musgrave's records contained repeated markdowns for leadership and communication problems, and my discussions with him and his troops indicated he had no positive agenda and that morale in his section was extremely low. I quickly moved to expand MSgt Bolton's authority and autonomy while reassigning MSgt Musgrave to a non-supervisory role, where he was both comfortable and productive. Both branches flourished as a result.

You may observe that I did not, in this case, leave my Level 1 MSgt in place to try to lead him up the continuum. Guilty as charged. There's a limit to what a leader can reasonably hope to accomplish with any given follower, and in this case I chose to devote my attentions elsewhere. This decision was made easier by the fact that the work center in question was suffering from damaging morale, discipline and productivity problems, which I couldn't allow to continue.

In another case, I welcomed into my division MSgt Kirkpatrick, a very strong Level 3 leader, who was committed to his people and his programs, but who tended to block out larger unit priorities as “distractions” to his agenda. I worked with our directorate’s CMSgt to encourage him in his initiatives and reward him with strong awards packages. At the same time, we lobbied the commander to choose him as our first sergeant’s stand-in. He soon began adding many Level 4 traits to his arsenal, improving both the reach and the effect of his leadership.

Again, this construct is useful as a lens through which to interpret capabilities and structure assignments, though it’s subjective by nature and by no means foolproof. Indeed, my earlier MSgt Smith account demonstrates how a leader’s judgment can fail him, when I mistook a Level 2 MSgt for a Level 3, and then watched as he slowly became frustrated and angry, eventually sliding back into Level 1. Experience can be a cruel teacher, but a teacher nonetheless, to those who are willing to be corrected by its rod and staff.

Air Force General Hal Hornburg has said, “The first duty of a leader is to create more leaders.”⁵ Equipping yourself with an understanding of how MSgts mature along this continuum can be a vital step toward excelling at this “first duty”, with perhaps a few less welts from the rod of experience along the way.

Notes

1. All names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.
2. Extracted from the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000, Houghton Mifflin Company.
3. Air Force Instruction 36-2618, The Enlisted Force Structure, para. 5.1.1.4., 1 April 1999.
4. Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982).
5. Extracted from Gen Hornburg’s ACC Initial Command Focus memorandum, 14 Nov 01.