

CompanyCommand

Unleashing the Power
Of the Army Profession

A circular graphic with a globe as the background. Two soldiers in full military gear, including helmets and jackets, are shown from the chest up. They are positioned as if sitting in the front of a vehicle, looking at a map or document on a dashboard. The globe shows the Americas and parts of Europe and Africa. The text 'Unleashing the Power' is arched across the top, and 'Of the Army Profession' is arched across the bottom.

Nancy Dixon + Nate Allen + Tony Burgess
Pete Kilner + Steve Schweitzer

Introduction

“One month ago my company was ambushed in Afghanistan. In fact, we were ambushed on the same road that you will be using as you work in and out of your firebase. Two of my guys were wounded as we fought our way out. We learned some valuable lessons through spilt blood and sweat. I’m here to share these lessons with you so that you can hit the ground running and continue the mission.” —Captain Eric Lopez

The cutting-edge knowledge of the Army resides in the minds of leaders at the tip of the spear. Connecting these leaders in conversation brings together the Army's greatest knowledge resources, unleashing the power of the Army profession to improve combat effectiveness.

An illustration of the power of connecting leaders in conversation happened in March 2004, when Eric Lopez and five other officers who had commanded companies in Afghanistan flew to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, to interact with leaders in the 25th Infantry Division (LIGHT) who were preparing to deploy. For three days these captains shared with Soldiers in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team the hard-earned knowledge they had forged in places like Kandahar, Kabul, and the Shahi-Kot Valley. Their stories about combat operations, the enemy, and the Afghan environment had a directness and immediacy that only someone who had recently led Soldiers in Afghanistan could provide.

Connections and conversations such as these are central aspects of the CompanyCommand “professional forum.” The term forum brings to mind the ancient Roman Forum, a gathering place for conversation that served as an incubator for ideas that advanced the entire society. Including the word professional places a forum in the context of a particular profession's advancement, in this case that of the Army. “Professional Forum” thus communicates who participates (members of the profession), why they participate (to improve the profession’s effectiveness), and how they participate (with candor and mutual respect). Most of all, it identifies

conversation and the exchange of professional knowledge as the defining characteristics.

One way to observe the CompanyCommand (CC) professional forum in action is by logging on to the CC.mil Web site (<http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>). This Web site enables company commanders to gain access to each other and thereby tap into the collective knowledge of the members. While the Web site may be the visible face of the CompanyCommand professional forum, it represents only one part of the whole. Less visible, but no less powerful, are the many other conversations company commanders are having with each other—by email, on the telephone, gathered around a HMMWV, and in CPs, mess halls, and FOBs around the world.

Such peer-to-peer conversations, in all of their various formats, represent a grassroots movement among company commanders who are discovering that their individual ability to learn and be effective is closely tied to their profession's collective ability to do the same.

The CC Web Site's Beginnings

In the spring of 2000 a team of officers developed and launched www.CompanyCommand.com as a means of connecting past, present, and future company commanders in an ongoing conversation about leading Soldiers and building combat-ready units. Use of the Web site, fueled by word of mouth, spread like wildfire.

The growing team of leaders working to make [CompanyCommand.com](http://www.CompanyCommand.com) happen were on a mission to provide cutting-edge, world-class resources for their comrades. They published a book about company command,¹ created a monthly e-newsletter, and began engaging in face-to-face opportunities such as the 10th Mountain Division Pre-Cmd/ISG Course. Along the way, they launched a similar forum for platoon leaders known as PlatoonLeader.org. After two years of continuous growth, the team realized that further development would require organizational support. At this point, senior leaders at the United

¹ The book referenced is *Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level*, available via www.TakingtheGuidon.com.

States Military Academy stepped up to the plate and resourced the idea. Without this support, the forums could not have lasted into a third year. In 2002, the CC team officially “gifted” both Web sites to the Army. As a result, the Web sites were placed on military servers at West Point and given “.army.mil” urls,² but the vision, the ideas underpinning the work, and the team behind the scenes remain the same.

Four of the authors of this book—Army majors Nate Allen, Tony Burgess, Pete Kilner, and Steve Schweitzer—were part of the team that started CompanyCommand.com. Nancy Dixon, the fifth author, is a knowledge-management researcher and consultant whom the team met in 2002 after reading her book *Common Knowledge*.³ Nancy interacts with the other four on a regular basis and is an enthusiastic member of the CC team. When the term “we” is used in this book, it refers to these five authors.

The CompanyCommand Professional Forum

One way to describe CC is as a network of company commanders who connect in conversation about relevant content to advance the practice of company command.

- **Connecting** company commanders to each other gives them access to the knowledge of the profession. Having a connection means more than just having contact information—it means being aware of what the other knows. A professional community that is highly connected knows who knows what.
- Connections make **conversations** possible. It is through the back and forth of conversation that context and trust are established and that knowledge is both shared and created. (The reverse, of course, is also true—that is, conversations can create connections that lead to relationships and learning.)
- **Content** grows out of conversations. Content can be both the topic of conversations and an end product. For

² The original name—CompanyCommand.com (“dot com”)—is how many people continue to remember the Web site, and you will see it several times in this book when we directly quote people talking about it.

³ For more information about Nancy Dixon, visit www.commonknowledge.org.

example, if five company commanders who have experience with convoy operations have a conversation, the result is valuable content that is useful to many others. Likewise, content in the form of a convoy SOP requires a conversation for it to come alive and have meaning. To be useful, content must be current, rich in context, and relevant to the immediate needs of company commanders.

Connections, conversation, and content work in a mutually reinforcing fashion to enable members of the CC professional forum to advance the practice of company command. Several groups are instrumental in making these connections, conversations, and content happen: CC members, topic leads, command contacts, pointmen, and the CC support team.

CC Members

Company commanders *are* the CC professional forum. All company commanders—past, present, and future—are members. Those who choose to participate in the online aspect of their professional forum join up via <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>.

The CC Team

The following groups, taken as a whole, constitute the CC team:

Topic Leads. These are CC members who take responsibility for particular topic areas within CompanyCommand.army.mil. They manage and facilitate the main topics of the forum—leadership, warfighting, training, fitness, force protection, maintenance, supply, and Soldiers & families. Other topic leads provide leadership to “Rally Points,” which are forums within CC that serve specific types of company commanders—for example, ADA, EOD, and HQ. Still other topic leads coordinate special topic areas such as professional reading.

Command Contacts. These forum members, who have a depth of experience in a particular topic, make themselves available to company commanders via the online space. Command contacts respond to members’ questions, identify gaps in the knowledge about their topic that’s available online, and do much of the work

of connecting members. The command contacts, along with their respective topic leads, are thought leaders for a particular topic.

Pointmen. These are members who step up to perform critical tasks or lead projects that are more limited in scope. For example, CC pointmen have hosted focused online discussions, organized face-to-face gatherings of company commanders, and interviewed company commanders on the ground in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition, pointmen help “get the word out” to the profession, whether it’s news of a new forum launch or details about particular member needs.

CC Support Team. This is a smaller group of people, including the authors of this book, who serve the other members of the CC team. They interact with the larger Army, work the technology and design issues of the Web site, seek out resources, and handle the administrative requirements of running the forum.

Book Framework

The primary reader we have in mind as we write this book is a professional-forum leader. We hope that leaders across the Army who are participating in professional forums can adapt our experiences to their particular situations.

Part 1

Here you will find stories of a professional forum in action. You will also be introduced to leaders “in the arena” who are passionately committed to leading Soldiers and making a difference for the Army profession. Their stories illustrate the ways in which connections, conversation, and content work together to deliver value to members.

Part 2

This is the “how to” section of the book. It focuses on the practical activities of professional-forum leadership: first steps, growing a team, and putting the key elements of connections, conversation, and content into action. Part 2 closes with a description of the Afghan Commander Prep Initiative, an event that brings together

many of the principles and techniques presented throughout the book.

Part 3

Etienne Wenger, Kent Greenes, and Hubert Saint-Onge—three leading thinkers in the field of knowledge management—share their insights about leading professional forums. Having personally benefited from their mentoring, we are excited to have them share some of their experience and wisdom.

The Army profession is effective only to the degree that its members take responsibility for it, engage in the collective conversation that shapes it, and see themselves as being connected to their fellow warriors—past, present, and future. The profession is like a powerful river—in constant motion as it gains new Soldiers and loses experienced ones—its members learning and innovating as they engage with a rapidly changing environment.

The stories and words of company commanders that are presented here depict a profession that is advancing toward an exciting future. This book is an invitation to members of the Army to connect, to engage with each other, and to unleash the power of the profession.

To Company-Level Leaders:

Our Army has marched through many formidable challenges in its almost 230 years, and the era in which you find yourself leading Soldiers into battle is as daunting as perhaps there has ever been. I am extremely proud of you, as are all of us "eider" warriors.

Reading this book has caused me to reflect on my time as a young leader, which included tours in Vietnam fighting a decentralized counterinsurgency—a fight with many parallels to what you are facing today. In my experience, leaders must learn and adapt faster than the enemy in order to win. You know better than I that the current situation and enemy are in a rapid cycle of continuous change, and I don't see it slowing down anytime soon. Given the scale of change and the pervasive nature of this current war, we've got to achieve breakthroughs in the way that we learn and adapt as an organization.

I reported to the armor advanced course in 1964, directly from a tour in Vietnam. There were thirteen of us students who had just spent a year of our lives fighting a very different kind of war than we had been trained for. The advanced course instruction, however, focused on the Soviet threat, and no one wanted to hear about our experience! There we were: thirteen captains with critical knowledge and no mechanism to share it with the wider profession. Since then, the Army has come a long way, to include publishing counterinsurgency doctrine. And I am exhilarated to see you joining together and collectively raising the bar.

Raising the bar is not something your environment mysteriously does to you; it must be something you do for yourself. For the Army to collectively raise the bar requires the corporate body of professionals to take action. This book tells the story of Army leaders who—through the process of conversation and idea sharing—are building upon each other's hard-earned knowledge and are, in fact, already achieving breakthroughs. Considering what is at stake, I want to acknowledge these efforts and, at the same time, call you to even greater levels of involvement in service to one another and to the profession.

Thank you for advancing the Profession of Arms!

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