Rapid Knowledge Transfer Through the Battle Command Knowledge System

By Col. James J. Galvin Jr.

In an endorsement on the back cover of the book *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession*, Gen. Gordon Sullivan, U.S. Army retired, recounted how he returned from Vietnam to attend the Captains' Career Course, but was unable to share what he learned in combat with others. "There we were: thirteen captains with critical knowledge and no mechanism to share it with the wider profession," stated Sullivan. Today, however, because of the innovative bottom-up initiatives of soldiers who harnessed the power of the Internet, and the Army's deliberate top-down initiatives to rapidly transfer knowledge, soldiers no longer have to face Sullivan's dilemma. One major initiative enabling Army-wide knowledge transfer is the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS).

Thousands of NCOs recently participated in a knowledge-sharing event on NCO Net, one of the BCKS networks. The full-time facilitator of the network, Sgt. Maj. Joe Pearson, U.S. Army retired, posted an animated video developed by the Army Research Institute depicting an escalating problem at a traffic control point (TCP) in Iraq. In the short clip, Spc. Sondelli was disrespectful to his NCO and an Iraqi citizen passing through a vehicle inspection point. The actions of Sgt. Ash, Sondelli and the Iraqi lead to an unnecessarily violent confrontation.

The video, posted on a Friday before a long weekend, elicited more than 220 written responses in a threaded discussion viewed by thousands of NCOs within just a few days. The substantive comments reflected both thought and insight from credible professionals. They identified the leadership shortcomings exhibited by Sgt. Ash, the violation of sound tactical doctrine at the TCP and the importance of cultural awareness in dealing with Iraqis. The impressive exchange of knowledge by the NCO community in its analysis of "Trouble at Checkpoint 4" demonstrated the timely and relevant knowledge-transfer capabilities of BCKS now available to all soldiers.

BCKS is designed to rapidly transfer knowledge among soldiers in the operating and generating forces. The participants in the "Checkpoint 4" discussion gathered virtually in one online community, but geographically resided on four different continents and represented both the operating and generating forces. Some participants were in Iraq at the time, most others were veterans of previous deployments. They ranged in grade from sergeant to command sergeant major.

Innovative NCOs and company-grade officers have used online communities to exchange best practices, solve problems and improve their professional development for some time. In 1998, then SFC Dan Elder, currently the CSM of Army Materiel Command, began sites for squad leaders and other NCOs. The four founders of Company-Command.com, Captains Nate Allen, Tony Burgess, Pete Kilner and Steve Schweitzer, now field-grade officers with Ph.D.s at West Point, created an online "community of practice" for captains in 2000. As other online communities developed, Army leadership realized the great power in the capabilities of these knowledge-sharing venues. Subsequently, the Army Secretary and Chief of Staff directed the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., to implement BCKS to create online "Professional Forums" for soldiers.

Today, BCKS grows at a rate of approximately 1,500 new members each month. Soldiers, Army civilians and contractors participate in a variety of forums that fall into three main areas. First, the Leader Forums provide a place for commanders and leaders to gather virtually with their peers. Second, the Staff Forums provide places for soldiers who perform duties in personnel, intelligence, operations, logistics or other staff activities to gather and share their knowledge. Finally, the Functional Forums allow soldiers with particular interests in areas such as counterinsurgency, domestic operations or recruiting to interact virtually with other professionals.

Soldiers participate in numerous forums and share their knowledge in a way that cross-pollinates the Army. Most BCKS members participate in multiple forums. For example, a major attending the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth is a member of the Military Intelligence Net because of his branch. He is also a member of S3-XO Net because of his next likely duty assignment at the battalion level.

Finally, since he is a Reservist, he participates in the Army Reserve Net. He positions himself to continually learn from others and to share what he knows.

Professional Forums are a component of an emerging practice being embraced by the Army called knowledge management (KM), which consists of four primary activities: content management, collaboration, expertise location and interactive knowledge transfer. Content management is simply keeping track of information and being able to rapidly access it. Content management, like all of KM, involves people, process and technology. People manage information

by using tagging and storing processes via web-accessible databases. Collaboration occurs among people who use tools, such as chat, text messaging, white boarding, voice-over Internet Protocol and wikis, to form teams to accomplish tasks. In expertise location, people participate in processes that allow them to share their identity and talents with the community at large in order to avail themselves and gain access to others. Interactive knowledge transfer involves people who immerse themselves in real or virtual environments and receive coaching and mentoring that allows them to learn and understand.

The NCOs who participated in the "Checkpoint 4" discussion practiced knowledge management. The forum facilitator posted the video in an easily accessible location, linked the content to a discussion area, broadcasted a notice to members and provided leading questions to guide the knowledge exchange. The community collaborated to create an excellent collection of insights about the nuances of leadership, tactics and cultural awareness that are crucial to successful TCP operations. The experts who participated provided their contact information and background credentials upon joining the BCKS communities and shared them with others with a click of a mouse. The entire exchange around the vignette is an example of the power of immersion and community coaching. The collective wisdom of a large segment of the NCO community created greater understanding and improved the decision-making skills of all the leaders who participated in the virtual experience.

The creative use of the vignette on NCO Net, the response of the community and the growing appreciation for the power of knowledge management places BCKS at an important crossroads. As a young organization with minimal resources, the BCKS team finds many opportunities to expand the synergy of online communities by developing complementary relationships with others. In order to advance the practice of KM even further, the BCKS team works with the doctrine development community to introduce KM principles into Army doctrine. In addition, the BCKS team provides training for those interested in learning to practice KM in their organization.

The BCKS homepage is inside AKO under the "quick links" pull down and inside the "knowledge networks" area. Links to the BCKS sign-in page are available by entering "bcks" into the major search engines or going straight to the URL at: https://bcks.army.mil. More about BCKS is available at www.wikipedia.com. ☐

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