

Dept. of Military Affairs: Squad leader training focuses on diversity, people

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VOLK FIELD, Wis. — Squad leaders and non-commissioned officers from units throughout the Wisconsin Army National Guard came together at Volk Field, March 13, for an inaugural Squad Leader Training event provided by some of Wisconsin's top noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

The training event — an initiative launched by Command Sgt. Maj. Curtis Patrouille, the Wisconsin Army National Guard's senior enlisted leader — brought together a group of more than 50 NCOs to discuss counseling, team building, and held think-tank exercises that provided an open forum to talk about what matters most: the Soldiers.

"How do you affect a cultural change in the organization?" Patrouille asked. "You do it one person at a time."

"People are our number one priority, and the squad leader training focuses on our people," said Brig. Gen. Robyn Blader, assistant adjutant general for readiness and training for Army. "The squad leader training emphasized the importance of taking care of our people, and provided our NCOs with tools and best practices to lead and take care of our people."

There was an icebreaker to kick off the training where Patrouille and other top NCOs took time to listen and answer questions directly from training attendees.

"We have to get it down to the squad leader level," Patrouille said. "We had some think tanks where we brought in some E-5s and E-6s" — sergeants and staff

sergeants, the ranks who would typically fill team leader and squad leader positions considered as first-line leaders — “and asked them what additional training they want. They’re going to take this back to their squads and their units and affect change at that level, and it’s just going to have that ripple effect.”

Staff Sgt. Shawn Wehner, a religious affairs NCO with the 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade’s unit ministry team, was glad to attend the training event.

“I think it was very informative, well thought out and very open to engaging the Soldiers,” Wehner said. “I think everyone feels comfortable in sharing, and I think that’s important.

“This is absolutely a great opportunity,” he continued. “There’s always room to become better leaders.”

Most attendees at the training event were between E-5 and E-6 rank, however, there were some ambitious E-4s — specialists or corporals — whose supervisors singled them out due to their leadership potential and promise.

“I am grateful they asked me to come here so I can get the knowledge before I become squad leader,” said Cpl. Rachel Purucker, human resources specialist with Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation Battalion. “I feel like, for me, it has been very helpful because I am a corporal promotable to a sergeant.”

The training focused on, “how to lead, speak to, and work with different types of people with different personalities,” Purucker said. “I think it has been awesome so far.”

Sgt. Abigail DeGuire from the 1158th Transportation Company led open discussions about spectrum mapping and other leadership traits.

“We have a lot of similar ideas in this room,” she acknowledged. “We have a lot of like-minded people who have the same concepts and understanding about what makes a good leader.”

The event agenda included other topics — building cohesive teams with different personalities, convenience counseling, unit training management at the squad leader level, and an after-action review (AAR). The trainees conducted surveys, which were aimed at providing supportive feedback to help develop future training events.

The open forum helped facilitate supportive discussions among the up-and-coming NCOs.

Command Sgt. Maj. Aaron Johnson, with the 732nd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, was the event's convenience counselor trainer. He said he was happy to see participants raising their hands.

"You can see the next generation start to grab those things and start to change that culture over time," Johnson said. "Because if they do not do it, it is just going to be lost."

Johnson emphasized the importance of the networking aspect of the training.

"It is better if it comes from their peers," he explained. "They are much more likely to listen to somebody that is in their shoes, doing what they are doing — it just carries more weight. For them to be able to network, hear what is going on out there in the different battalions and different units," was important.

"If you've got a good idea that maybe I can implement, then that's all the better," Johnson added. "It is really up to you. You are the next generation. You are the key."

"Everybody has their own leadership styles," Patrouille said. "Everybody has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. We need that diversity of thought. It makes us stronger. Using that diversity and being able to identify our strengths and weaknesses within each other keeps growing the organization."

Patrouille made clear that this was only the beginning of a broader program that has been in the works for quite some time.

"We're looking to try and do this twice every year," Patrouille said

"Our NCOs are the backbone of our organization," Blader added, "and play a critical role in taking care of our most valuable asset — our people."