

CompanyCommand: A Professional Community That Works

BY DR. NANCY M. DIXON



Army Capt. Chanda Mofu, left, prepares to lead a joint American–Iraqi patrol. Since returning from Iraq, where he commanded two infantry companies, Mofu has stepped up to play a leadership role on the CompanyCommand team.

Photo courtesy of CompanyCommand

The term “community” has become ubiquitous—everything from list serves to “MySpace” has been tagged a “community.” The kind of community I describe here is one whose members are dedicated to mutual growth and development—so I might label it a professional development community.

CompanyCommand is a professional forum through which soldiers who have been given command of a company (about 150 soldiers) learn from each other in the mess hall, over the hood of a Humvee in Iraq, and online at <http://companycommand.army.mil>. CompanyCommand has been heralded by the army as its premier professional forum, notwithstanding its grassroots beginnings in 1995 by two young U.S. Army officers. Even after being brought behind the army firewall, CompanyCommand has retained its grassroots spirit and governance, remaining a community of young officers exchanging knowledge based on the daily struggles of frontline professionals like themselves. Company commanders are a rich source of knowledge about how to be effective leaders in the rapidly changing battle environment; they alone have firsthand knowledge of what the role demands.

Conversation about subjects that really matter to this group of soldiers is at the heart of this forum: “How do I deal with the death of a soldier I am responsible for?” “Is it my responsibility to help soldiers be comfortable with the reality of killing or just train them to do it?” “How do I keep soldiers physically fit for the mountainous terrain and overwhelming heat and cold of Afghanistan?” “What have we learned about how to interact with Iraqis?” There are no doctrinal or clear-cut answers to these issues; they are the ambiguous questions of leadership. When answers are not clear, conversation with those facing similar issues is an essential means of deepening one’s own thinking about important subjects.

Company commanders challenge each other’s thinking by raising difficult issues in the online forum; they meet together to read and discuss books through the Pro-Reading program; they

provide emotional support in informal face-to-face gatherings on base; they celebrate each other’s lives and successes with pictures, honors, and recognition on the CompanyCommand Web site; they meet together at a yearly rendezvous; and they provide practical firsthand knowledge about the task they are all engaged in through conversations.

These company commanders believe they are making a difference in each other’s professional development. They would say they are “giving back” to a profession that has given them much.

The Core Team Is the Heart of the Community

This willingness to give back and to support each other does not occur without a great deal of effort by a volunteer group at the core of the community that actively builds the relationships that glue the community together.

Any community that shares knowledge and supports and develops each other must have a small, socially connected, and committed group of members that takes responsibility for the majority of the activity in the system.^{1,3,4} CompanyCommand has some thirty dedicated volunteers, each responsible for a specialized section of the community: for instance, maintenance, war fighting, military police. Each core team member is a company commander, who is a specialist from the field he or she leads—someone who knows the ins and outs of the daily work of that specialty field.

Company commanders typically stay in their command post for only a couple of years before being rotated out to a new assignment. So the core team, like the whole of CompanyCommand, is a dynamic community with a constant influx of new members, while others are phasing out.

CompanyCommand team members (left to right) Chanda Mofu, Dan Dwyer, Nate Self, and Jay Miseli share ideas during the CC team's annual "OnFire! Rendezvous," which brings together the team for a face-to-face weekend of camaraderie, training, and planning. All four have led soldiers in combat. Self was awarded the Silver Star for his valor in Afghanistan.



Once out of command, core team members quickly realize that they are no longer in touch with the needs of soldiers on the ground and begin to look for the person who will follow them in leading their section. But not just any volunteer will do; they look for someone who, like themselves, wants to have an impact on the profession—who has a willingness to give back.

This core group maintains the care and feeding of CompanyCommand, but like any community, they require care and feeding themselves. The core group becomes a subcommunity within the whole, training, encouraging, and supporting each other in their efforts to be more effective core team leaders. As a vital part of that support, the core team holds a yearly rendezvous to celebrate successes and think about the needs of the community. Here a core team member describes one of those meetings:

The rendezvous was huge because that brought together such a group of like-minded professionals, and staying with that group of people for three or four days, talking with them, generating ideas, was a huge energy boost. It really just kind of got me reenergized and back into the thick of it. It gave me some huge ideas on reorganizing the taxonomy of how *Soldiers and Families* was organized and trying to make it more content friendly and trying to make it more user friendly. And it really just kind of reaffirmed what I thought I was doing with CompanyCommand and why it was valuable to me and why it was valuable to the profession.¹

What It Takes to Connect the Community

In studying CompanyCommand, Tony Burgess, one of the founders, identified five roles core team members play in their communities.¹ The words of the core team members themselves best describe what they do in these roles and why they choose to serve in this way.

1. Contributor

Those who become core team leaders have themselves been active members of the forum, and as core team leaders they continue to bring all of themselves to the new role—their current work issues and problems as well as their knowledge and experience.

[CompanyCommand is] a place I could give what I had to share and at the same time still ask; I could still be in a learning environment. It wasn't, you know, a teacher-student type thing. It was truly a group of guys [saying], okay ... let's throw this thing out there and see what people think about that.

2. Connector

In this role core team members connect people to other knowledgeable people and to content that is on the site, and they close the loop by finding out what actions the soldier who asked the question took as a result of the conversation, playing that back as well.

You know that this guy over here has something to give and this guy over here is looking for it, and you're the one who helps make that connection possible [I ask myself] what can I do to find the other people who have had this experience and get them involved with those guys who are over there [in combat] now? And you do it in a variety of ways. You use the Web site itself to make a call to arms, "Hey, you know this guy is out here doing this. Is there anybody who can help him out?" And people jump on it. Or you make the private connection [via e-mail or phone].

3. Facilitator

In this role the core team member works to deepen the conversations that occur in his specialty group, serving as a catalyst and sometimes a provocateur.

Right Photo: U.S. Army Captain and CompanyCommand team member Jason Toole, right, with his company first sergeant in Afghanistan.



We recently debuted a question about whether or not commanders have a responsibility for teaching soldiers how to deal with killing. It's a great question, and one that needs to be dealt with, but ... the problem was that it didn't seem to generate a whole lot of conversation because there was an enormous amount of consensus there. So what I decided to do was play a little bit of devil's advocate ... to post an opposing view ... and that generated some good responses from other people. I felt like *I* could put myself out there and make myself a 50-meter target for other people to take shots at and help generate conversation.

This core team member used his provocative post to help those in the conversation clarify their own thinking about this issue by articulating the reasoning underlying their positions. Core team members often invite diverse views, from another perspective or from another specialty, to enrich a conversation.

4. Social Catalyst

This role is about making connections and building relationships. One way core team members serve as social catalysts is by warmly welcoming new members and establishing a personal connection with them, sometimes through e-mail, sometimes by picking up the phone, and often by taking the time to meet them in person when the core team member is traveling to an area where the new member is located.

Core team members acknowledge contributions in a personal way that builds the sense of community. This is such a vital part of their role that I include two quotes here to illustrate the nature of their responses. There are no all-inclusive, "thanks for your posting" messages that go out.

Anybody who posts or responds to questions, or provides a really awesome tool—anybody who contributes to the supply forum—I'd usually shoot back an e-mail saying, "Hey, what a great tool." Or "What a great idea." Or

"What a great thought. I hope this isn't the last time we see you contributing because you were really on target with your comments." Or "The tool you provided, I see how that can help."

"[Name], you many not realize it, but you really helped that guy. Did you see the response that he brought up?" Or, "Did you see that this guy that you helped then turned around and added to two other conversations and imported this knowledge object, and now he's a contributor to CompanyCommand and he's working hard? That was because of your intervention; that was because of your answer; that was because of the content that you helped him find; that was because you just wrote to him and said, 'Good work,' you know; that was due to your intervention. Well done!"

In an ever-changing community of 2,000 company commanders, participants in the site cannot hope to build a trust relationship with each person in their specialty area, but they can know and have been touched by the core team members. Through exchanges illustrated by those above, the community takes on a spirit of openness and acceptance. Core team leaders create a tone and attitude that permeates the whole.

5. Steward

Core team members look for gaps in the knowledge of their section and find ways to plug those holes. They shoot videos of company commanders on the ground, interview heroes and generals, send out surveys to capture the collective thinking on issues, and watch the site to see what issues and concerns are rising through the conversations. They serve as a quality control for their section, although always in a way that continues to build relationships.

... it doesn't mean that I just reach out and delete; it means that I reach out to that individual who put it up

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Army Capt. Jason Toole talks with an Afghanistan National Police chief in 2006. After returning from his second deployment to Afghanistan, Toole became a CompanyCommand topic lead as a way to share what he had learned about that country and counterinsurgency operations.

there and say, “Can you tell me why you thought this should be on CompanyCommand?” Because frequently what happens is that ... they wanted to do the right thing and they were in such a rush to get it up there that they didn’t really think about how to phrase it. So by talking to them and refining it and saying, “Give me the context behind this” ... you get some really great products.

Ownership and Professional Pride

What I hear in these many quotes, and what I hope you as the reader hear, is the sense of ownership these core team leaders feel

about CompanyCommand. It is *their* community, not the U.S. Army’s, and though they work hard to serve the army, they do so by helping company commanders meet their own needs for professional development.

There is a final quote from an early study I conducted with leaders in the core team, which for me sums up the need for a professional development community:

As I become more senior, more professionally mature, I have a greater desire to have an impact on the profession—not only because I care about it and I care about the soldiers, but also because I’m going to continue to work inside this profession. If you believe in something, you want to have an impact on it because it’s going to come back to you at some point. So I ask myself, “What direction are we taking our profession?” You could ask that about your company, your battalion, about the Web site, about the army. In the same way that you are an active participant in shaping the government when you vote, you have the opportunity to be actively involved in shaping this profession.²

Professional development occurs when professionals face difficult issues that they care about and are able to reflect on that experience with colleagues who do similar work and in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. ●

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1. The quotes in this article are from Tony Burgess, *Understanding the Core Group in a Distributed Community of Practice* (Dissertation, The George Washington University, 2006).

2. Nancy M. Dixon, Nate Allen, Tony Burgess, Pete Kilner, and Steve Schweitzer, *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession* (New York: The Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning, West Point, 2005).

3. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

4. Nancy M. Dixon, *Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).