

Project Athena in NCO PME

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Soldiers are the Army's most valuable resource and most important weapon system. And like any weapon system, they require maintenance and development to accomplish their objectives and maintain the upper hand on the battlefield. Project Athena is a self-development tool that allows noncommissioned officers (NCOs) at all levels to see their deficiencies and correct them over the long-term. This article details Project Athena and its implementation at every level of NCO Professional Military Education (PME) to facilitate leader development.

Background

Developed by the Center for the Army Profession and Leadership (CAPL), Project Athena utilizes a progressive and confidential battery of assessments administered across all levels of the NCO PME system. The assessments provide detailed feedback to help Soldiers develop self-awareness and assist in their personal and professional development over the course of their careers.

"Project Athena is designed to enable self-awareness and self-development, so individuals become more effective leaders, whether that comes out in competition during the brigade and battalion command assessment programs or for any follow-on assignment. Soldiers deserve leaders who are self-aware and humble enough to know where they can improve. In turn, Soldiers follow self-aware and humble leaders who are committed to self-improvement." (Fallesen et al., para. 13)

Project Athena also includes a specifically tailored coaching component leaders can use at all echelons to assist Soldiers in creating or modifying Common Individual Development Plans (IDP). *The Common IDP is Project Athena-specific and is created or updated after every level of PME. These IDPs are targeted training plans that identify training and leadership opportunities to improve Soldiers' skills and competencies.

Project Athena Assessments

The assessments in Project Athena provide detailed insight into three key developmental areas: personal, cognitive, and leadership. This enables Soldiers to identify "blind spots", or trouble areas, and helps build their self-awareness. This is fundamental for both long-term career development and for building a well-rounded leader ready for the future battlefield (Department of the Army, 2017).

The tests are initiated at the Basic Leader Course and continue at each subsequent PME course to include the Sergeants Major Course. They are designed to give specific feedback which Soldiers can then internalize and create a Common IDP or action plan, either individually or with assistance from a coach or mentor. They will update their IDP during every NCO PME level. When Soldiers take part in creating their own development plans it allows them to take ownership of their improvement while guiding it with their personal and professional goals in mind. Basic Leader Course (BLC)

As Soldiers become new NCOs and leaders, they are assessed at BLC on their interpersonal skills and decision-making under pressure as a first line leader (Oney, 2021). Project Athena assessments reveal how Soldiers see themselves, the world, and how the world (peers) sees them.

Advanced Leader Course (ALC)

At ALC, the leadership focus is often on adaptability and being prepared for changing environments (Oney, 2021). Assessments here show Soldiers how well they adapt to evolving situations, especially in decisive action operations. These are designed to build upon the previous assessments from BLC and provide a realistic view of individual growth between NCO PME courses.

Senior Leader Course (SLC)

At SLC, the leadership focus shifts to critical thinking and quick decision-making under pressure (Oney, 2021). Assessments at this level seek to

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improve complex problem-solving skills as well as situational understanding, vital for mission command and evolving operating environments.

Master Leader Course (MLC) & Sergeants Major Course As Soldiers develop further as senior NCOs, their leadership focus becomes less on direct troop contact and shifts toward systems and big picture decision-making (Oney, 2021). Assessments at these upper levels of PME help develop situational awareness at the local, regional, and global scale.

Common IDP

The Common IDP is an important document a Soldier will use throughout each stage of their career. Sgt. Maj. R.W. Ferguson, Mission Command Center of Excellence, describes the Common IDP as a “Snapshot of how a Soldier/ leader sees themselves and how they plan to improve, both professionally, and personally. It will outline the strengths, weaknesses, immediate action plans, short-term and long-term goals” (Personal communication, 19 July 2021).

The Common IDP consists of long- and short-term goals, a section for a 90-day action plan, and the three Project Athena insight areas: personal, cognitive, and leadership. These sections complement each other and keep track of a Soldier’s progress and development as they graduate each NCO PME course, move to different units, or are re-evaluated during counseling sessions.

Coaching

Coaching is the final component that rounds out Project Athena. Coaches provide NCOs an outside viewpoint and can objectively guide them in setting and following through with goals. According to CAPL:

“Coaches can come from different relationships: those who are familiar and those who are provided by the organization to help individuals and teams improve. The role of coaches involves helping leaders understand and appreciate their current level of ability and potential and guide the leader to choose ways to get better. When coaching is part of a program of individual assessments, coaches help explain the assessment results, guide the identification of strengths and developmental needs, provide insight or sugges-

tions on how to build on knowledge and skill, and guide a leader through the creation of an action plan or development plan. Coaches help leaders gain insight that can have an immediate effect on how the leader can improve their choices and behaviors.” (CAPL, 2020, p. 2)

Conclusion

Developing self-aware Soldiers capable of dominating the chaos and ambiguity of the contemporary operating environment is the desired outcome of Project Athena. Conducting operations across all warfighting domains requires leaders who are agile, adaptable, and flexible. Project Athena provides insight and promotes accelerated and insightful leader development for Soldiers at all levels. The Army’s most valuable resource deserves nothing less.

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