

# *NEWS FROM THE CTC*



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## **Combat Engineer Operations as a Service-Based Industry**



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## **Executive Summary**

Engineer rotational training units (RTU) often succeed or fail at JRTC based on their understanding of the resurging importance of customer service. The past few years has allowed many engineers to focus almost solely on their product (defeating IEDs or deconstructing FOBs) as opposed to their customer, the supported maneuver unit.

In this article the author pinpoints three key components to improved customer service: a customer-service orientation, a structure that supports this orientation, and a flow of information to allow customer analysis. All three of these components are relatable to RTU best practices at the Joint Readiness Training Center in order to keep their customer, the maneuver unit, satisfied

# Combat Engineer Operations as a Service-Based Industry

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Engineer rotational training units (RTU) often succeed or fail at JRTC based on their understanding of the resurging importance of customer service. The past few years has allowed many engineers to focus almost solely on their product (defeating IEDs or deconstructing FOBs) as opposed to their customer, the supported maneuver unit. As the Combat Training Centers transition from counterinsurgency to decisive action training environment (DATE), engineer units need to rebuild their ability to communicate with and support maneuver units.

A customer service mindset helps support this need by alleviating common issues within engineer units in DATE. The military decision making process should build a similar mindset through proper running estimates and course of action analysis; however, business insights into customer service provide an interesting structure to illuminate JRTC best practices.

MIT Sloan's business journal published an article by George Day entitled "Creating a Superior Customer-Relating Capability." This article pinpoints three key components to improved customer service: a customer-service orientation, a structure that supports this orientation, and a flow of information to allow customer analysis.<sup>1</sup> All three of these components are relatable to RTU best practices at the Joint Readiness Training Center.

### Customer Service Orientation

Creating a customer-service orientation within your unit requires developing the "shared belief that customer retention is a high priority for everyone."<sup>2</sup> Engineer units, of course, are not concerned with retention; however, they should be concerned with keeping their customer, the maneuver unit, satisfied. The best practice with regard to orientation is to build a culture emphasizing the importance of delivering quality products and building positive relationships. It is not enough for a Task Force Engineer to understand that his job is service-based; the attitude must be persuasive throughout the organization.

Recently at JRTC, a squad of combat engineers that were OPCON to an infantry company embodied this concept. The Squad Leader constantly involved himself in company planning to see how his engineers could help. He did not just meet his commander's intent; he helped shape that intent by providing his capabilities constantly during his commander's Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs). As a result, that company understood the value of their engineer asset and supported the engineer effort throughout the operation. Developing this culture of a service orientation pays off as it fosters a relationship that improves the overall team effort.

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<sup>1</sup> George Day, "Creating a Superior Customer-Relating Capability," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Spring 2003, pg. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

## Customer Service Structure

Units that are “organized around customer groups and process...are much better at providing clear accountability than those organized according to products, functions, or geographies.”<sup>3</sup> Although Soldiers rarely have the opportunity to change the structure or incentives within the Army, the concept of structuring your unit to improve customer service still leads to important best practices. The Brigade Engineer Battalion (BEB) concept has already clearly defined the customer, the Brigade Combat Team; however, engineer task organization often leaves room for improvement. Recommending an appropriate command or support relationship based on METT-TC is a key aspect of the Task Force Engineer’s job. According to *ATP 3-34.22: Engineer Operations—Brigade Combat Team and Below*, units should choose support relationships as opposed to command relationships when “maximum flexibility is needed to rapidly move key engineer capabilities between multiple units.”<sup>4</sup> JRTC best practices with task organization include two concepts. First, all units must understand who provides sustainment support and who establishes priorities with the selected command or support relationship. We often see engineers that still rely on their parent unit for sustainment support even though they are OPCON to a maneuver element. Second, weigh the main effort when allotting resources, especially dig assets.

Additional room for service structure improvement is in the development of Platoon Leaders as capable Task Force Engineers. Ideally, Company Commanders are best suited to this position, but we have seen instances of Sapper Platoon Leaders needing to advise their battalion staff on how engineers can best support mobility, counter mobility, and survivability operations. Often, however, these Platoon Leaders have not been fully educated in engineer running estimates, reverse breach planning, obstacle overlays, and survivability execution matrixes. Additionally, Platoon Leaders are often very proficient in their platoon’s expertise, but they are lacking in knowledge of other engineer unit capabilities such as horizontal, bridging, or geospatial. Units should prioritize these topics for leader professional development so that their unit is structured to provide the necessary customer service to help maneuver units make the most of their engineer support.

## Customer Information

Businesses often think about collecting customer information in terms of information technology systems that gather and analyze data. In the Army, we need to understand our customer, but we accomplish this by focusing on understanding maneuver capabilities and building positive relationships. Understanding our maneuver units means that we, as engineers, must do the research to understand our customers and predict their needs. For example, the number of breach lanes or the number of hull defilade positions that your unit requires is key information for estimates, and the max effective range of your supported unit’s weapons will be vital in advising a commander where to emplace obstacles relative to battle positions.

A second way that engineers should gather data on our customers is by adopting the best practice of developing habitual relationships. At JRTC, the difference between units with developed

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *APT 3-34.22: Engineer Operations—Brigade Combat Team and Below*, December 2014, pg. 2-2.

habitual relationships and those that neglect to form this bond are stark. By working together on a regular basis, maneuver and engineer elements have the opportunity to learn each other's capabilities, limitations, and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Even those units that are not afforded the benefit of habitual relationships can improve their customer service by exchanging information. Hosting a professional day with demonstrations of engineer capabilities, for example, is a strong way to build bonds with units that you might support.

### **Attitudes and Relationships**

Improving customer services goes beyond specific best practices. "Creating a Superior Customer-Relating Capability" suggests that "[c]ompanies must also recognize that the collective mind-set, beliefs, and values embedded in an orientation towards relationships is what sets leaders apart."<sup>5</sup> Developing this culture of customer service will help units improve relationships with their maneuver counterparts, increase the utilization of engineer assets, and ultimately accomplish the mission.

One final thought for those that think these best practices are too far out of their hands. Consider Sara Green's theory for improving customer service as published in the *Harvard Business Review*: good customer service is all about individuals taking responsibility for the problems that arise in their company.<sup>6</sup> The best practice here is simple. The next time your maneuver unit has a problem, seek to be the one to engineer the solution.

### **Training and Evaluation Outlines**

The purpose of this article has been to consider Combat Engineer Operations from a business perspective in order to illustrate a few JRTC best practices. For additional resources, Army Training and Evaluation Outlines (T&EOs) provide detailed explanations of how to accomplish the tasks referenced in this paper. Some of the vital ones to customer service are as follows:

- 052-714-9101: Advice Commander on Engineer Unit's Organizations, Equipment, and Capabilities
- 052-702-9105: Plan Engineer Support for Joint and Combined Operations
- 052-195-4050: Prepare Engineer Running Estimate
- 052-702-9106: Participate in the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP) as an Engineer Staff Officer

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<sup>5</sup> Day, 81.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Green, "The Key to Great Customer Service," *Harvard Business Review Online*, 9 June 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/06/the-key-to-great-customer-serv/>, pg. 2.