



I'm back at the point in an officer's career again; the point where I am no longer directly leading soldiers. I've traded in my map board, weapon, and radio for a laptop, Microsoft Office, and a diet fueled by our brigade chaplain's finest black coffee. I've come to a mental crossroads that I believe all leaders reach in their military careers, primarily as a senior captain after company command; I can fall into the trap of believing that I will only have the opportunity to lead soldiers in those rare opportunities when I'm in command, or I can leverage all my career opportunities to lead those around me - especially my peers and superiors, while on a staff. Do I want to be a staff minion in charge of other minions or do I want to remain a leader? I think I'm going to go with the latter.

To lead on staff, we have to abandon the perspectives and vocabulary that many officers tend to adopt: "I'm just a staff nug," or "The subordinates that work for me are my minions," just to name a few. As Ray Kimball writes in [The Army Officer's Guide to Mentoring](#), "Words mean things. The terms we choose shape our worldview, define our frames of reference, and limit our solutions to identified problems." When we accept this view of our subordinates, and ourselves, we contribute to a climate that runs counter to developing a mission command mindset in our organization, and miss out on the chance to remain a leader, no matter whether we have hierarchical authority.

Alternatively, when we view staff time as a leadership opportunity, we further develop our own abilities, contribute to the leader development of our subordinates and peers, and play a critical role in making our overall organization better.

### **How can we lead on staff?**

**View all projects as developmental opportunities.** Staff work can be a great catalyst for building confidence in yourself and your subordinates, developing better communication

skills, and getting better at organizational leadership. From leading working groups, to briefing the boss on potential courses of action, we gain confidence in our ability to communicate (both written and spoken), and learn to accomplish the mission *without* the authorities that come with command. While staff work isn't glamorous, each position we serve in contributes to our operational domain of learning and is invaluable to our development. And in order to take advantage of these opportunities, we have to be open to them

**Take the lead on professional development.** Just because an officer is on staff, doesn't mean that LPDs/OPDs have to be put on hold. An officer on staff can request to host a brown bag lunch session ranging from topics like preparing for company command to coaching peers and subordinates through the military decision-making process or just educating others on their particular warfighting function. Several of my friends, while on staffs, have hosted "[Drink and Think](#)" or "[Cigars, Scotch, and Strategy](#)". These are nights away from the office that create an informal environment for professional discussion among peers (and superiors, if you're doing it right). For a more formal example, my current brigade operations officer created opportunities for his captains to accompany line units during a live fire exercise to aid in the preparation for going down to a battalion.

**Be an effective listener.** Have you ever joined a staff and within the first couple of days heard someone say, "That guy over there....worthless. Can't do anything right!" It might not be the officer or NCO that is worthless, it's the way in which they are utilized on the staff that is the problem. Sometimes just having a conversation and *listening* to these individuals might reveal talents that weren't previously tapped by the organization. I've seen quite a few of these "worthless" folks become valuable and respected members of the team, only after a leader on staff took the time to listen. In addition to identifying untapped talent on the staff, listening to problems can help you identify shortfalls in the organization, see opportunities, and assist the commander in increasing the effectiveness of the unit.

In the end, it comes down to perspective. How do you view your role within the organization regardless of formal authority, how do you interact with and support your peers, and how to do view the subordinates who work for you? I promise that if you view staff time through the lens of leadership, and not just a time filler in between commands, you will have a more fulfilling career, and in the end our organizations will be much better for it. If you foster and contribute to a "staff minion" culture, you're going to get minions.



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