



By: Steve Leonard

There comes a time when we all throw our boots over the wire. It's a time of reflection on the past and a time of anticipation for what's yet to come. It's an opportunity to share lessons learned, to look back on the kernels of wisdom that come with years of service. It's one last chance to offer a little mentoring for those who can't yet see their career horizons. So, it was with some degree of anticipation that I hovered over a post on [From the Green Notebook](#) from Army Lieutenant Colonel Dominick "Dom" Edwards, entitled "[31 Things Your Senior Rater Would Like You to Know That He Probably Won't Tell you](#)." I've been there, he's rapidly approaching that point, and many more of you will be there one day, too.

As I prepared to throw my own boots over the wire, much of my reflection paralleled that of

Dom Edwards, almost a collection of pieces of advice I would have offered myself when I pinned on my gold bars 28 years earlier. My own emphasis focused in on your [personal reputation](#) as a leader, [the brand you inherently promote](#), whether or not you realize it. Edwards captured many of the same thoughts, and admittedly zeroed in on some of his own personal idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, this is about mentoring. If you're doing your job as a leader, then you ought to be sharing as much of that accrued knowledge and wisdom as humanly possible.

Edwards' post, however, [generated a fair amount of negative comments and sparked an unusually heated debate](#). My own reaction was mixed. While on one hand I appreciate the need for a leader to be literate, fair, and insightful, I was taken aback by suggestions that someone would be judging my choice of spouse or the social graces of my children, or that someone might think that bullion rank was somehow a necessity. Everyone has idiosyncrasies, and these are no doubt high on Edwards' list. I have my own and am convinced that if I allowed them to bleed into the public discourse people would think I was "one off." But that's a conversation for another day.



What Edwards is really addressing is the concept of your personal leader brand. His post focuses on a few “unspoken” aspects of your brand that often need attention, but are not often discussed between senior rater and subordinate. But they should be. The problem with *unspoken norms*, as he describes them, is that they represent a significant portion of your brand as a leader. They cannot remain unspoken. You don’t have to be a mentor to someone to share expectations with them, you just have to be a good leader. And those expectations have to be both spoken *and* reinforced.

Your leader brand is a reflection of you as a total leader. It’s your identity, as viewed through the eyes of those around you. Is there a social component to it? Clearly. Does your family play a role in your brand? You’d better believe it. If you marry a stripper – male or female – or your kids burn golf carts on the green of the 11th hole on the post golf course,

we'll have some awkward moments. But no more so than if you don't meet height and weight standards or can't string two sentences together in a report. I don't care if you wear bullion rank or not, but make damn sure that you're in the designated uniform when the situation calls for it and that you wear that uniform with pride.*

Much of what we do is about building teams, where social events play a major role. However, there are reasons why people opt not to participate in social events. Leaders that allow their organizations to become overly cliquish bear a significant responsibility for the social climate. Spouses that socially ostracize other spouses also contribute to the challenge of team building. As leaders, it's incumbent upon us to know *why* people avoid social events before leveling judgment against them. It may be a blinding flash of the obvious, but 'socially awkward' is the norm for many events; the key to success is making everyone feel comfortable and welcome, regardless of the awkwardness of the event. Thank You notes are old school, but classy. That said, if you and all of your subordinates send me Thank You notes after visiting my house, I will probably think you have a long stick up your ass, however polite a gesture that may be.

Should you choose your spouse carefully? Sure, that's solid advice for anyone.** Should you raise your children to respect and communicate with adults? That's pretty much universal. How much should your spouse be involved in your profession? That really depends on him or her, but it's a good idea to weigh the organizational climate before your spouse schedules an office call with the commander to discuss what should be on the training schedule.*** It's common today for both spouses to work, and even for them both to be in uniform. It's easy for someone to tell you that your spouse has a designated place of duty after hours, but that doesn't always sell so well on the homefront. And good luck telling your spouse that it's "okay if you work."

The problem with *unspoken norms* is just that. They're unspoken. Unspoken norms, while not uncommon, lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and mistakes. If it's a norm, it

should be well understood by all and not at all left to guesswork. Because when we leave organizational norms to guesswork, we're left with the Seinfeld episode in which [George is fired for having sex with the cleaning lady on his desk](#): "Was that wrong?"

In the end, this entire discussion comes down to transparency, mentoring, and an individual's recognition of their own leader brand. As leaders, we bear a great responsibility in developing and maturing our subordinate leaders. No aspect of that process should be unspoken or left to chance. If we truly believe that we are charged with growing the next generation of our nation's leaders, then we need to take that task to heart and ensure that we commit ourselves to see it through to the bitter end. And if you still show up to the Dining In in board shorts and flip flops with a rabid dog and three kids, then we'll have a different conversation on Monday morning.

* To this day, I still feel a little guilty for once telling someone that a formal Dining Out was actually a costume-themed party. He and his spouse arrived as Little Bo Peep and her lost sheep. Hilarity ensued, as did weeks of retribution.

** Marrying a stripper is not unheard of, nor is marrying a soldier from your platoon. Neither of which, however, are generally considered "good choices." Yes, who you choose for a spouse says a lot about who you are, but how you live your life and raise your family says much more.

*** True story. You can't make up stuff that good.

[Steve Leonard](#) is a retired U.S. Army strategist and the creative force behind [Doctrine Man!!](#) A career writer and speaker with a passion for developing and mentoring the next generation of thinking leaders, he is a founding member of the [Military Writers Guild](#) and a regular contributor to the [Atlantic Council's Art of Future Warfare Project](#). Published extensively, Steve's writing focuses on issues of foreign policy, national security, strategy and planning, leadership and leader development, military history, and, on occasion, fiction.

An alumnus of the School of Advanced Military Studies, he led the writing team for the 2008 edition of the Army's capstone manual, FM 3-0, and the interagency team that authored the U.S. Army's first [stability operations doctrine](#). He is the author/artist of four other books and is currently developing a graphic novel that will debut in December 2016. Follow his writing on [The Strategy Bridge](#) or his personal blog, [The Pendulum](#), and on Twitter at [@Doctrine_Man](#).

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