



By: Joan Sommers

There are multiple reasons that take leaders out of the office and it's not just TDY. Non-emergency surgery, NCO professional education schools, birth of a child, Ranger school, and the normal 30 days of leave a year will lead you away from the troops. The question is: Have you prepared your organization for your absence?

Part of this conversation is based on having self-awareness that when you are gone, someone else is doing your job. The phone calls and questions from higher will be answered by another person, so we have a professional obligation and responsibility to ensure that success can be achieved without us. This falls in line with the principle of Mission Command, however, junior leaders may not have enough experience in the unit, the Army,

or in life to instinctively move into executing disciplined initiative the day you take leave. Mission command is grown and developed, not turned on and off when needed. Mission command also assumes that everyone understands the commander's intent, which may not be true across your organization.

In the ensuing days before leaving, we find ourselves caught in a flurry of DTS, leave forms, and out of office setup. However, I would argue that as much preparation should go into leaving than the mission you are leaving the office to conduct.

Ask these questions while preparing for your absence:

Is now the best time? When you do have control over your personal leave or children's medical appointments for example, take a hard look at the calendars that exist in your unit. Often there is never a **good** time, but there are worse times than others. Utilizing block leave periods and four day weekends is a professional way to minimize your absence. Remember that absence is a "request" to your supervisor. You need to have a deliberate conversation with your rater to ask permission to go TDY, go to school, or schedule physical therapy. This should include multiple courses of action that provides options. Do not circumvent your chain of command to get signatures, even if you can, you shouldn't. If your absence is unexpected to your boss, this will be noted as disrespectful. Your absence also needs to be broadcasted to your subordinates as well. Everyone should know you are going to be absent, so if there are any pressing issues that require your attention they can see you before you leave. Addressing a company before you go on leave sets a great example in several ways. You are showing that leaders take care of themselves, it gives a chance to introduce the XO (or your replacement), and it provides a good example of how to communicate information to the unit.

Have I identified my replacement? Do they know they are my replacement?

Identifying a next man up is a good way to develop a junior leader. However, if this person doesn't know they are in charge we are setting them up for failure. In turn, we are setting up our unit for failure. In a command setting, this is easy to identify when you have a successor built into the chain already such as an XO. In a staff section or a platoon, the next man up may be less obvious and a deliberate selection. Take a moment to identify who could benefit from some time in the hot seat. The best squad leader could easily take your place, but a less experienced one could gain valuable experience for a short time. The person who will walk in your shoes while you are absent will be afforded a professionally developing experience.

Does my replacement have the tools needed to succeed? Once you have identified your representative, the preparation work really begins. You should set aside a solid time block to sit with this person to review your coverage plan. This includes pertinent events occurring during your absence: meetings, exercises, Soldier issues, and administrative requirements. What about email distros? Will they be able to receive the information coming from higher? More importantly, you should provide guidance that will move the organization further along while you are gone. Assumption of command orders are a simple admin task, but your next man up needs to know what you expect them to do. This includes their left and right limits for decision making, due outs upon your return, and what situations require a phone call. During a simple week long TDY, maintaining the status quo may be good enough. However, if you are heading on convalescent leave or to SF selection for weeks or even months then you are jeopardizing the momentum of the unit. The unit should not have to wait for your return in order to function.

Upon return, your replacement should backbrief you on everything. Notes from meetings, decisions that were made, updates on Soldiers, and questions that need to be addressed. This back brief is important not just to catch up the leader who was absent. Rather, the backbrief is a developmental opportunity for the next man up, and a forum to provide feedback on their performance as well as synchronize the leadership.

While this article focuses on known absence, it's also important to note that we don't always have the luxury of picking our absence. A medical emergency, casualty assistance tasking, or court-martial duty may come up suddenly with little time to prepare. Thinking about your absence is useful even if you don't have something ready to put on the calendar. A valid conversation along the lines of "who would take my place if I got in an accident today" and letting your NCOIC and key leaders know what your thoughts are prompts good discussion all around. Good communication with your boss about subordinate's potential could also assist in selecting your replacement, as the decision may not always be yours.

Leaders at all levels have a responsibility to manage, as well as prepare, for absence. The OPTEMPO and requirements of today's Army do not allow for us to wait for the presence of leaders to continue mission. When we fail to prepare for our absence, we are leaving people to simply take notes and unable to advance organizational goals. In order to grow and develop junior leaders, we owe them guidance and direction while we are away. The mission requires it.

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