



By. Chad Foster

Lists of “rules” are always problematic because they are never really complete or perfect. There is ALWAYS a better way to phrase something or a key idea that gets left out. However, the list below is one that has stayed with me for a number of years. I helped put it together in collaboration with my peers while serving as a Brigade Executive Officer in the 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division.

A group of us old, “salty” majors put together these “rules” in the hope that that the new majors coming into the unit might learn from it. Since then, I have kept this list with me and shared it with many individuals.

At times, this list as served as reminder of what I should do . . . and at other times it was an

admonishment of where I fell short. In every case, it has been a positive influence. The best evidence of this claim is that a former subordinate sent it back to me a couple of years ago after he had completed his time as a highly successful Brigade Operations Officer. His accompanying note said that he was thankful for the advice and mentorship that I had offered him over the years. Most importantly, he said that he “attempted to give [his subordinates] some of the knowledge and experience you imparted on me when I was a Troop Commander.” This list was among the things he used in that effort. I offer it here with the hope that others might find it useful, too.

1-Never let your commander look stupid. It’s your job to ensure that he or she is armed with the best analysis and the most up to date information in order to answer questions from above and to make decisions. This will help keep higher HQ off his back and, by extension, out of your unit’s business. Make sure that if your Commander looks dumb, it is because of something that is beyond your control and NOT due to a shortfall in effort or quality of support from you.

2-As a Battalion S3, build a strong relationship with the Company-level commanders. Mentor them to be majors and cultivate their buy-in for the tough decisions.

3-As a Battalion XO, build a strong relationship with the Company-level XOs. Mentor them to be company commanders and to enforce tough standards to back up their company commanders.

4-Write well ... or at least ensure that your work is proofread thoroughly by someone who does. Compose clear, concise sentences and paragraphs. Knowledge won’t make up for deficient communication skills. In the long run, work to improve your writing ability. The higher you go, the more difficult it is to hide a deficiency in this area.

5-Be collaborative in solving problems and in planning, but always go into a

meeting with a possible 60-70% solution in your head. Going in with ZERO idea how to proceed can be a recipe for a wasted meeting. On the other hand, don't be wed to your "solution." Be on the lookout for better ideas, and when one comes up don't hesitate to scrap yours and move forward. You don't have to be (and shouldn't expect to be) the source of all the good ideas.

6-Delegate. Don't feel like you have to brief the boss on everything yourself or do all the staff work personally. You won't survive because your time and energy are limited. Put your captains and lieutenants (and other MAJs if you are at BCT level) in front of the Commander as much as possible to brief their work. Help them prepare and give them good, clear guidance. After that, let them run and give credit.

7-Underwrite the mistakes of subordinates. Create an atmosphere where initiative, decisiveness, and personal accountability are the expectation for all. This is the only way you'll be able to execute the type of decentralized operations that are essential for an organization to be successful under the toughest and most chaotic of conditions. Mistakes are going to happen. As long as these aren't legal, moral, or ethical lapses (or the same mistake over and over again), be ok with it. Use these stumbles as opportunities to teach and learn in a face-saving environment. Doing so is essential to build a learning organization.

8-Trust but verify. Give your subordinates room to maneuver and the freedom to work, but spot check their progress. You'll quickly figure out who needs close supervision and who does not. Once you've determined that, act accordingly. You'll soon find that everyone in the organization will be working hard to earn their way into the latter category. Along the way, you'll have the opportunity to both teach others and to learn yourself.

9-Stay calm. If your first option is to always get upset and raise your voice, it will cease to mean anything to those around you. Save your emotion for when it really matters - and

NEVER let it get out of control. Keep your team relaxed so that they feel comfortable sharing ideas, voicing recommendations, and giving you (and the Commander) a full and honest assessment of the situation.

10-Protect the staff. They're YOUR team. The natural tendency is for subordinate units and commanders to complain about higher HQ. Subordinate unit commanders will sometimes try to abuse the staff, and it's your job to take up for them when they deserve it (and sometimes even when they don't). Hold the staff accountable and be responsive to the needs/requests of subordinate units ... however, NEVER allow your team to get run over and bullied. At the Brigade level, this includes bullying from Battalion Commanders. Dealing with that situation, of course, requires careful action and communication . . . but it can (and must) be done.

Best of luck as you move forward as a Field Grade Officer! It is going to be a wild ride, alternating between exhilarating highs and discouraging lows. Deal with it. When it's all over, you will be the one that determines whether or not the experience is one that you can be proud of. There is a lot that will happen that is beyond your ability to control. Don't concern yourself with those things. Instead, focus on what you can affect. That will make the difference for you and, more importantly, for your team.

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