



By [Steve Leonard](#), creator of [Doctrine Man!!](#)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

The “Iron Major” phase of your career can seem to drag on forever, drifting in that twilight zone between the nostalgia of company command and the halcyon days that are *sure* to come. Every day is another day on staff, where success is often measured in terms of slide production or Unit Status Report ratings. Even the term “Iron Major” is a misnomer, often confused for a reference to physical acumen when it is actually a euphemism for the resolve necessary to endure successive years on staff with little to no authority.

In their own way, those years were also deeply rewarding for me. First as a brigade Support Operations Officer (SPO), then as an Executive Officer (XO), I could share the knowledge gained from a decade’s worth of experience with younger leaders, helping them to grow and develop along the way. I was able to leverage wisdom earned in combat to advantage as we,

in turn, prepared to launch into a new war. Along the way, I realized that I had become that “old major” I looked up to as a junior officer; I strived to live up to their legacies, to be the leader I saw in them.

For me, those two “key and developmental” positions defined my Iron Major years. Years of technical development prepared me well for my year as a SPO; a year in the Command and General Staff Officer Course, followed by a year in the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and an assignment as a division planner only refined that development. Success as a SPO can be attributed to a number of factors, but there are a few stand out from the crowd:

Integration: As a SPO, you are a key member of the brigade staff, and the one member of the staff most responsible for keeping the brigade combat ready. That means being an integral part of the brigade commander’s team, not a wallflower who shows up for the weekly maintenance meeting. Get involved and stay involved.

Anticipation: More so than anyone else, the SPO is responsible for anticipating the support requirements of the brigade and ensuring those needs are proactively met. If you are reacting to the needs of the brigade, you are robbing the commander of vital combat power and lethality. Understand and project the logistical needs of the brigade, consumption rates, and delivery times and methods. And always remember that the logistics estimate changes constantly.

Flexibility: The logistics system is not always going to respond to your needs, so a good SPO must build flexibility into any support plan: alternative sources of supply, local purchase options, backup maintenance, non-standard casualty evacuation, etc. Support should be as seamless as possible, and flexibility goes a long way to preventing operational pauses due to interruptions in sustainment.

Dependability: Trust is essential between the supported and supporting organizations. The SPO is the critical link in that relationship. We have all heard horror stories about how trust broke down because of a lack of dependability. Your job is to make sure that does not happen, and it is probably the one thing that will keep you up at night the most often.

My XO time was equally rewarding, and I look back on it today as probably the single greatest learning experience of my career. My brigade commander possessed a near sense of *coup d’œil on the tactical battlefield, an innate ability to “see” the fight before it unfolded. Keeping up with a leader with such ability pushed the staff to new heights. Not a day passed when we were not learning something from him, and that learning paid*

dividends for the rest of my career.

Serving as an XO or Chief of Staff is the closest approximation to cat herding as you will find, and there is a dearth of quality writing on the subject. Of the *eight* paragraphs that detail the functions of the staff in Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*, only three offer any real insights into how the staff supports the commander, arguably the most significant duty of the XO. So, where do you start?

Focus: If the staff truly exists to support the commander, then the XO needs to maintain a singular focus on *the boss*. How much focus depends on the commander. A good leader does not require a lot of “care and feeding”; a less-capable leader will tend to put demands on the staff that can detract from the mission. The XO must manage both the expectations of the commander and “fighter management” of the staff, and there will be times those two will conflict. Welcome to the life of an Iron Major.

Decision-Making: If war is truly a contest of wills, then the arbiter of success is the ability to make qualitatively better decisions faster than your opponent. A mentor of mine once said to me, “At the end of the day, the hardest thing you will ever do is execute command and control in combat.” That is the crux of what the XO and the staff do for the commander: help them make the best decisions possible with the information available at the time.

Calm: The XO is often occupied negotiating the tenuous peace between the staff and the subordinate commanders (who often think the staff work for them). That can mean keeping the staff from levying less-than-useful requirements on subordinate units and helping the commanders to understand why the staff tasks them. When caught in this tug of war, always remember: never lose your cool, never let them see you sweat. If you are yelling, you are not in control. If you are not in control, someone else is, and you are failing the commander.

Pretty Colors: One of the least understood jobs of the XO is to help the commander to stay “on task.” Commanding an organization is hard enough; it is even harder with constant distractions. Sometimes, that means helping the commander help themselves. My rule: if it does not help the commander to make a decision, then it is probably something that you can handle yourself. This is often easier said than done, however.

Aside from professional military education and engaging mentors, self-study and emulation are important to preparing for life as an Iron Major. In the realm of self-study, I probably consumed hundreds of books on decision-making and leadership under fire (pretty much a year in SAMS) leading up to my Iron Major years. For brevity’s sake, I recommend the following books:

Defeat into Victory: Field Marshal Sir William Slim should be mandatory reading for every leader. Few books capture what it means to lead as clearly and succinctly.

Iconoclast: As a staff officer, success is typically determined by your ability to “sell” an idea, to make a convincing case when it counts. Gregory Burns’ book is a primer on how to translate an idea into something that excites and motivates people. It is also a cautionary tale about those who lack that ability.

Influence without Authority: This is your go-to source as a staff officer, because this is your life. If you have not read it, do so. If you have, read it again.

A last piece of advice? Keep your sense of humor about you. You are going to need it more than you think.

Steve Leonard is a former senior military strategist and the creative force behind [Doctrines Man!!](#) He is a non-resident fellow at the [Modern War Institute at West Point](#), the co-founder of the national security blog [Divergent Options](#), co-founder and board member of the [Military Writers Guild](#), and a frequent contributor to the [Atlantic Council’s Art of Future Warfare Project](#).

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)