



By: Tony Cucolo

Exceptional Personal Appearance: The Baseline for a Great First Impression

I have taken a lot of good-natured chiding and grief for this portion of the coaching - one of my Majors called it "The Blazer Brief" — but I cannot overstate the importance of sustaining exceptional personal appearance and its impact on making a strong first impression. It simply has to become your lifestyle and habit to be effective. It applies to personal hygiene, uniforms and personal attire. Some tips follow on all.

Good personal hygiene is a given; don't ever let it slip, and do your best even under the difficult field conditions of combat. You will be expected to be the walking observable standard. Back home, it is much easier to meet the standard and therefore expected. When I was a Brigade Commander, my staff and I had to depart via commercial airline for a training

event late one Sunday night. As my staff assembled in the airport, I noted one of my Majors who had dressed for airline comfort (shorts, t-shirt and sandals) and had not shaved since before PT Friday morning. Before I could pull him aside for some quiet coaching, the XO ripped him up, and finished by saying, "You represent all of us, and you don't know who you might meet on this flight." Sure enough, I watched a renowned Congressional Representative and Member of the House Armed Services Committee walk down the aisle in coach and sit right next to my very comfortable Major. "Hi, what is you do, young man?" was his first question. After that experience, I didn't have to say word to him about maintaining the standard.

As a Major you are expected to know what the dress codes are for the terms casual, informal, semi-formal and formal so you may coach young officers. You may find slightly conflicting definitions, so when in doubt, just "over-dress."

Clothing and uniforms are a significant expense, so consider budgeting over time your acquisition of certain items. Items I recommend all field grades have on hand:

Blues/ASU that fit. That set you've had since commissioning may have to be retired. Additionally, consider multiple elements and accessories of the ASU (shirt, trousers, rank, nametags) uniform so you can have more than one uniform hanging in the closet, "ready to wear."

Over garments such as a black windbreaker, a sweater, a raincoat or winter overcoat that fit.

"Scrambled eggs" for your ASU service cap. Don't wait too long; you will find yourself in need when you least expect it.

Re-furbish your OCP ACU's, T-shirts, Velcro, patches, and boots as necessary. Retire and

frame, don't wear, your lucky t-shirt that is really soft, completely faded, and has a frayed neckline and holes in the armpits. You have to set the standard. And if you were selected for Major, the t-shirt worked, you're lucky anyway.

“Stuff maybe no one ever told you”:

The term “fit” is all important. To make a good first impression, your clothing has to fit well. This means snug and form-fitting, not baggy and not too tight. Learn what the term “drape” means; if your clothes are too tight, they do not drape properly. Avoid the “Well I always lose/gain a bunch of weight on deployment, so I'll just have stuff I know will always fit in the closet” approach to fit. Make the effort to read about current styles and trends and do your best within your budget to stay current.

If you are just starting out building your “mature” civilian wardrobe, then purchase, and have cleaned, pressed and ready to go the “unofficial social uniform.” An example for men would be a dark blue blazer, khaki and gray slacks (both), two pair good dress shoes (one black pair, one brown), cotton white long sleeve dress shirts and several ties to go with this outfit selected by someone you trust. Men and women should consider and budget for the purchase of a quality dark “business” suit if you do not own one - it will have multiple uses.

And remember, men (we seem to need the most help): the tip of the tie touches the top of the belt, your belt matches your shoes (e.g., brown belt is worn with brown shoes), socks match trousers (e.g., grey trousers are complemented by grey socks). And while I am a fan of the current trend of statement-making bright/colorful socks, use judgement: in a conservative setting, or if sitting on a dais or elevated platform, don't bring attention to yourself with amplified ankles. Seen it happen.

Think about what you'll wear on TDY and travel. You represent the young senior leadership of the profession, and you never know who you will meet.

Social Awareness: Tradition, Propriety and the Differentiating Sign of a Mature Professional

Some tips that will set you apart from both a decaying civility in our society but also your peer who have not yet matured:

When approaching a senior leader to talk to them, don't ignore the spouse, partner or significant other, and certainly do not ignore their children. In fact, make a point of engaging the spouse and children. I can't tell you the number of times one of my officers came up to my wife and I and only spoke to me. Clumsy, impolite, and...noted.

Practice the lost arts of properly making introductions (senior to junior, junior to senior, add a comment to kick start a conversation); actually answering rsvps; and sending notes - thank you and sympathy for example. All these things must be familiar, natural and sincere when you advance into the more senior ranks.

Practice "The Hello" and "The Goodbye" at social events. Gone are the days when you were expected to be present before the senior leader arrived and remain, no matter how bored you are, until the senior leader departed. However, make a point to go up to the senior leader and say hello early in the event, and then ensure you say goodbye if you are departing before they are. A minor thing, but it is the right things to do and it will set you apart

"Love the one you're with" - that is, your assigned unit. You may have been in the greatest unit on earth during your last assignment, but you are a field grade officer in your current unit. Keep the t-shirts and spirit gear from your last unit in a closet somewhere - as far as you are concerned, your current unit is the greatest outfit ever assembled in the history of warfare. Exude that feeling, always.

Actively Self-Police the Profession: You Now Care About Diversity, Equity and

Fairness.

I'm not being flippant here, I know you care about diversity, equity and fairness. But perhaps as a Captain you wanted to make sure you "treated everyone the same." You *quietly* led by example, took care of overt problems and issues, but focused on your duties. In short, you might have been a comfortable bystander, comfortable because you believed someone else was policing this battlefield. Now, as a Major, you are expected to *consciously check* to ensure there is equity and fairness and it is happening as part of the climate and culture of your organization. As a Major, you know demographics are important, and you actually look at numbers, you pause and see who is getting assignments, how awards are done, and you look for conspicuous or unconscious bias in the evaluations that cross your desk. You immediately speak up and address the overheard inappropriate comment. ...you're an active participant in ensuring fairness and equal opportunity exists.

Closer

This is about your professional reputation and a personal brand, if you will, that is crafted by your behavior and your presence, in both combat and in garrison/headquarters environments. You must realize now that as a Major, people are talking about you - the "Field Grade Slate" for an organization takes on the trappings of NFL Draft Day, and we all want to know about you. But you also need to know people will talk about you forever, too. I still receive calls with the question, "Hey, Tony, I see Emily Smith was on your staff...I am considering her for a key job here...what do you think?"

You have the image of a professional US Military Officer to live up to, but more importantly, you have a legacy to leave. Your example will help raise the next generation of professionals well. I acknowledge this is a unique and difficult stretch of years, but I am adding my voice to others who are asking you to commit yourself to the self-discipline and high standard of professionalism expected of you in this new role. You will find great personal pride and

satisfaction in doing so.

Wherever you are and whatever you are doing across all functional areas, I am extremely proud of who you are and your continued selfless commitment to the survival of our nation. I wish you great success in all you do and stand ready to be an outlet, a sounding board, an advisor, or a mentor should you need one.

Tony Cucolo transitioned from the military in September 2014 after 35 years of service. He is currently the Associate Vice Chancellor for Leadership Development and Veterans Affairs at the University of Texas System, and remains an active mentor for several US Army senior leader development programs. He can be reached at acucolo@utsystem.edu.

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