



By Scott Shaw

So you're in the Staff College, on the Division Staff, or just about to take that Iron Major position. CONGRATULATIONS! You're about to assume a very important role. Majors run Brigade Combat Teams and Brigade Combat Teams are what accomplish our Army's missions. Now, let's get to work because that's what field grade officers do.

I have been asked many times, "How can I best interact with my battalion commander?" Commanding through commanders, as battalion commanders do, is much different than the mostly direct leadership style of company command. Many field grade staff officers struggle in their ability to transition from that direct style of leadership to being able to support their commander as he or she "commands through commanders." In this post, I will describe a few methods that worked for me and may lead you to success with you battalion commander.

Commanders are responsible for many things. In fact, they are charged in *AR 600-20 Army Command Policy* (Ch 2-1b to be specific) with “everything their command does or fails to do.” They are busy people. Your job is to take as much off their plate as you can so that they can do the second thing that they are directly charged with accomplishing: “Drive the operations process through understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing operations.”(ADP 5-0 p2) Instead of asking “How can I best interact with my battalion commander,” a better question might be “How can I best support my commander accomplish their task of understanding, visualizing, describing, and directing our organization?” OR “How do I translate concepts into detailed plans?”

Before you assume your position: Discuss this topic with peers. Talk to colleagues from your days as a company commander, post-command assignments, the staff college, and in your current assignment. Ask questions like “What method are you using to engage your commander - face to face, email, meetings, etc?” “How often are you and your commander discussing operations in the battalion?” and “Is there a medium that your commander prefers to have his or her information presented?” Field grade leadership is about team ball and you need to reach out to as many people as you can to help you support your battalion in the best manner you can.

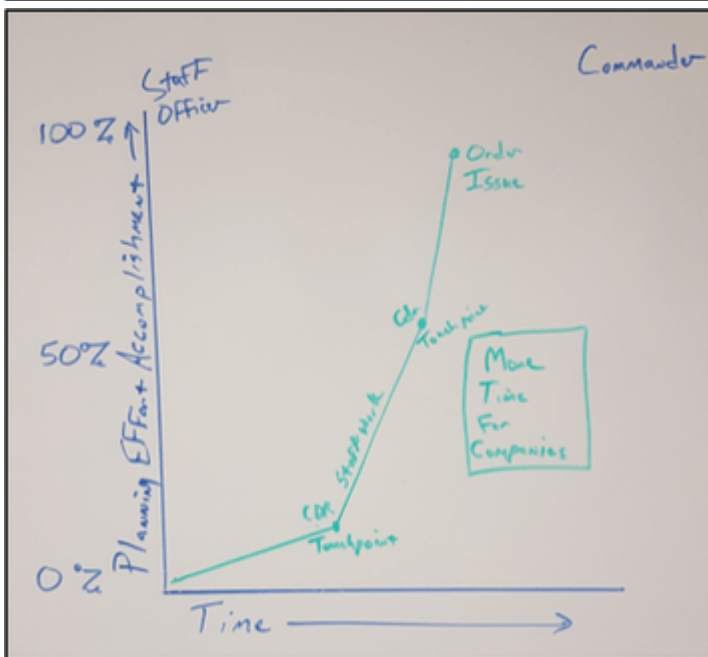
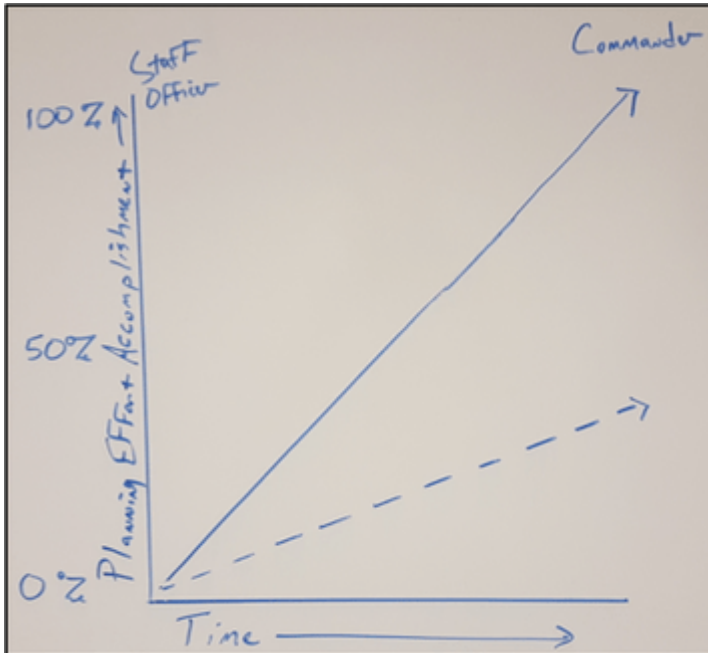
Method 1 - Initial Counseling: Most battalion commanders are going to conduct some sort of initial counseling session either before you report to the battalion or on the first day you’re in the battalion. They may lay out how they process information (Understand and Visualize) and how they communicate to the higher and lower units (Describe and Direct). If not, you need to proceed to Method 2.

Method 2 - Simple Observation: Spend time with the commander. Go to training with them. Watch them interact with the company commanders. Learn how they process information and how they then communicate what they process. Finally, formulate a plan for how to make that more efficient and effective. If this isn’t working, proceed to Method 3.

Method 3 - Talk to the Command Sergeant Major, your fellow field grade, and the Operations Sergeant Major: Chances are your Command Sergeant Major knows how the Battalion Commander processes information and communicates what they process. He or she likely has thought of a method to make it more efficient and effective. Your fellow field grade (if they have been in the battalion longer than you) likely has as well. Finally, the operations sergeant major (or operations sergeant) has likely seen the commander in the command post and the battalion area and will have some insight on the same. If that still doesn't answer your question, proceed to Method 4.

Method 4 - Direct Confrontation: If all of the above fail to get you to a point where you are clear on your methods, you may have to schedule time with the Commander to discuss your ability to support them. Get on their calendar sooner rather than later. DO NOT wait until your first performance counseling. The battalion will suffer for it if you do. Start with a statement like "Ma'am, I didn't do a good job of conveying your intent to the companies" and see where the conversation goes.

Once you determine how your battalion commander understands, visualizes, describes, and directs (the Operations Process), you need to figure out how to become more effective and efficient in assisting the Commander with their task. A technique that a friend of mine (Thanks, Wil) uses is multiple iterations vice the "all-encompassing decision brief" (see below). Many times field grade officers and the staff take their allotted time (the 1/3 or less, right?) and try to shoot for a 100% solution to a problem after receiving guidance from the Commander. In my experience, this usually results in the Commander receiving a 20% solution.



A better method that most commanders prefer is to bring a 50% solution that can receive course correction guidance much earlier. This 50% turns into 80% much more rapidly than the 20% solution described above. An 80% plan has a reasonable chance of success gives the companies more time, and will be refined in the battalion rehearsal. Don't be lured by the siren's song for perfection at first presentation.

Communicating with your battalion commander starts on day one and is refined until you leave your position. There's no "resting on your laurels." Communicating Commander's guidance to subordinate units is the single most important thing that field grade officers do, and you must know how to most optimally do it to save time for your subordinate units. This is how field grades "Take care of Soldiers."

Scott Shaw commanded the Cottonbalers of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry. He is currently a student at the Marine Corps War College.

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