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Two factors determine the operational reach of fighting formations: communications and logistics. The S6 is the center of gravity for the Signal Corps and it is our responsibility to ensure that commanders and subordinate leaders are able to communicate across their formations. Communication helps synchronize operations, mass effects, and enables warfighters to seize the initiative. And when units lose this ability, operations suffer.

The authors of this article are all former Division G6s and have observed well over 100 Battalion and Brigade S6s on training exercise, CTC rotations and operational deployments. Each contributor has at least three years as an S6/G6 with some having as upwards of seven years in these vital positions. We gained a sense that many officers want to avoid S6 positions and seek to stove-pipe in strategic jobs. This mis-guided intention seems to be fostered by the below-average promotion rate for Signal Officers to MAJ over the last 3 years. While many factors contribute to the low rates, it is noteworthy that officers who did well as an S6 also did well in the CSL selection where a premium is placed on leadership.

However, since the concern is there, let's address right up front the reasons that we saw officers fail as S6s:

They try to be the “smartest” communicator in the unit. There are plenty of technical problems to solve but that’s why you have Soldiers and NCOs. An S6 behind the keyboard during operations means that a Soldier is unemployed. It also means that the officer responsible for future operations is consumed with a current task. Nobody is “in charge” when this happens.

Take a step back when you find yourself knee-deep in a technical problem. You may have to fight your own personality in these cases too. Many officers go Signal because we like technology and want to tinker. We were further trained at a Basic Course that emphasized technical skills. However, you create more problems each time you try to fix things yourself and fail to put everyone to work. You need to run the team - not be the star of the team.

It also hurts when an S6 tries to “sound” smart instead of trying to communicate simply. The commander wants to know that his Mission Command equipment works - not about how complicated you can make the problem sound. Here’s an example. A successful S6 would say, “Boss, the phones are out. The team needs about 20 minutes to get it fixed. Meanwhile, Chat with the BN TOCs is the primary and we have the FM net as back-up right now. The battle staff is already tracking and ready to do the update via FM if required.”

An unsuccessful S6 would explain the same problem this way, “Boss, our Cisco Call Manager lost all the dial patterns for the subordinate and adjacent units. We can call other phones on site, but the Call Manager doesn’t know how to find phones at other sites. Right now, we’re working it but we don’t know how long it will take to re-establish call functions. Also, I updated the PACE plan on the portal.”

Translate Signal into something meaningful and do not consume everyone’s energy with techno babble. Intelligent officers make things simple - they don’t try to sound “smart.”

They fail to lead their team. This is strongly related to the first. An S6 is an organizational leader of technical experts. Embrace the practice of Mission Command within your team and get your people focused on a common purpose. You issue independent orders to support your unit’s mission and commander’s intent. This is an active process and requires both leadership and supervision. It is a human interaction and requires interpersonal skills.

Too often, we see the Soldiers and NCOs waiting for instructions and orders. The S6 has

locked himself away to nerd-out on equipment and failed to provide a shared common purpose. Work ceases because nobody knows their part. Look at it this way, we don't expect the BN S4 to pump gas or cook the chow. We expect them to get the gas to the vehicles and the chow to the troops. They do that by leading. We have never seen an S6 fired for NOT being smart enough but have seen plenty fail because they were weak leaders.

Build your team in training and supervise them during exercises. Your primary job is to lead the technical experts through human interaction and the practice of Mission Command.

They fail to understand their unit mission or be valuable members of the staff. In a great staff, every officer is an assistant S3. Everyone works on the operational plan and contributes their functional knowledge along the way. Every officer can pick up the battle and turn the commander's intent into orders.

The S6s that fail wall themselves off from the TOC floor and can be found in their Signal tent. They claim to be, "Monitoring the NETWORK," which translates to "watching a computer screen while the world turns around me." Successful S6s live on the TOC floor. They monitor the network by acting as a battle captain and ensuring services work for the staff. Don't make the S3 NCO look for you and fill out a remedy ticket because his phone doesn't work. Instead, live on that floor and be prepared to jump in when needed. When something is broken, you will know immediately and can exercise your leadership function to get the team fixing it.

They do not understand planning or plan the wrong things. The S6 needs to be involved in the MDMP process but too often focuses on solving the wrong problems. In basic terms, your WINT dish will always point up and your RETRANS will always go out front somewhere. Get past the basics of site selection and into the echelon of the move. Understand how your commander and staff communicate during transitions. Create options for them and be honest. There may be times and places where the best the commander is going to get are the radios in their truck. It's OK, they just need to know so the truck can be ready. Networks go up and down. Your job is to create options always and know what they are at a particular time and place.

Successful S6s know their options and it makes their teams pro-active. More importantly, they know how those options fit with the maneuver plan. They understand there are period of risk when units are moving and acknowledge them openly and honestly.

S6s fail when they rely solely on lockstep processes. This one is hard because process, assurance, and paperwork are ingrained in Strategic Signal's culture for valid reasons.

Tactical and Strategic Signal are intertwined, but it is challenging at times to bring Strategic Signal power to bear on Tactical Signal problems that are extremely time sensitive. Remedy Tickets have their place, but S6s must remain focused on delivering the outcomes their Commanders need, when they need it. For example, jumping the chain to figure out which of the 10 approval levels between you and the Regional Hub Node failed to put in your paperwork isn't comfortable, but it must be done.

S6s / G6s all face this struggle and the successful ones are quicker to pick up the phone and leverage the Signal support chain to get support. There isn't a leader in the Signal chain who wants to see you fail, but the chain often has so many links that one (or two) are bound to be weak. Positive change only comes when the supported units identify problems to our leaders. S6s fail when they refuse to acknowledge the above conditions and think that the "process" is more important than their commander's mission.

S6 is a great job. Many of us would argue that it was the BEST job we had. Failure, however, is very possible if you try to be too smart or fail to be a good boss and valuable teammate. It is a position that requires leadership above all things and an understanding of operations and maneuver. Done poorly and your commander's voice is confined to a TOC tent. Done well, it amplifies your commanders voice across a far-flung battlefield and enables our formations to fight and win.

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