



By: Josh Suthoff

The jump from direct to organizational leadership in the military is probably one of the most trying non-combat tests an officer or senior non-commissioned officer will experience. In a few years a company commander will go from leading/managing a hundred Soldiers to over 500. No longer is there the comfort of relaying your guidance face to face with your subordinates.

All leaders do not make the jump easily and Army career windows move at such a fast pace that someone may fail before they even realize it. An Army major today only spends around 24 months in their key developmental assignments, certainly not enough time to master the position. The best company commanders are not always the best field grade officers, because of choice or failure to adapt. In order to be successful, the jump to organizational leadership must be taught and reflected on prior to execution. Here are some key points I believe must be understood to set the conditions for that transition.

Just be a good dude/dudette. I am not sure if there is a higher compliment. I will be the first to admit that I was very parochial as a company commander, there was no better company and I put all my energy into ensuring we had what we needed to succeed and exceed expectations. You can't do that as a battalion executive officer or operations officer, instead you have to be aware of what is available outside your battalion and support your higher headquarters. If an adjacent battalion called and needed help with something, I would do everything I could to support, many times at the complaint of one of my company commanders.

It's important to establish yourself as a team player and someone that can be called on in a time of need. It's impossible to plan and catch all the mistakes before they happen, so it's comforting for others to know they have an ally to call for support. The brigade commander will notice these personalities because it will come up in conversation, "Sir, we didn't have Y, but X battalion helped me out."

Be comfortable with uncertainty and friction. The Army uses the Military Decision Making Process to help determine friction and pitfalls early. The reality is that plans are essential, but they are just a known point... then the weather, equipment, a higher headquarters, or just a Soldier being a Soldier throws a wrench in the plan. Anticipate what friction is likely to happen, mitigate risks and put leaders you trust at those points to adjust. Conducting an autopsy on a failed event is useful, but not at the time of failure. Stay calm, have branch plans and sequels prepared, and make recommendations to get the plan back on track. It's also important to understand that the same issues are happening to your higher and subordinate headquarters simultaneously, so throwing stones doesn't help. Do your best to mitigate, but even 18-hour work days will not get rid of all friction.

Always, always, always look for the next transition. If you, as a staff leader, are involved in the nuts and bolts of the current day's activities you may have already failed. There are a few exceptions (i.e. finalizing a key priority for your boss), but it should never be the norm. It is important to put an action officer between yourself and the tasks. It takes a strong leader to manage like this, because ultimately it's hard. This management style builds trust and empowers your subordinates. Instead of working a task, you need to be looking for the next transition so your organization doesn't slow down or come to a screeching halt and a surprise isn't waiting for your boss on the other side of the hill.

One of my mentors passed this idea of transitions to me, and frankly it's something that requires a constant revisit because it's easy to get drawn into one event. An organizational leader has to look and analyze what is next to keep their organization on the right track. You have direct leaders to take care of the now and you set the conditions for them to do that.

Set up systems: If you set up systems the previous two points will come easier. I set up a simple dashboard tracking system displayed for each of my sections with a directed suspense date to manage their workflow. Do what works for you, Make it accessible and transparent to the staff. A shared tracking system shows where the organizational staff energy is focused, where you may have excess energy to deal with unforecasted events, and sets clear expectations. Again, your job is not individual tasks, but the enforcement of systems and the allocation of staff effort.

These points will make the transition from direct to organizational leadership a smoother experience. Teaching these ideas while coaching and mentoring will help build better leaders, and provide a higher quality of leadership to our formations. The next step... [Staff Dominance!](#)

MAJ Josh Suthoff is currently serving as a BDE Executive Officer and has served in both S3 and Executive Officer positions at BDE and BN level. Josh is married with four kids and has served at Ft. Campbell, Bragg, and Carson.

Share this:

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