



“Throw out your conceited opinions, for it is impossible for a person to begin to learn what he thinks he already knows.” - Epictetus, Discourses

I think three of the hardest words for leaders to say are, “I don’t know.” No matter the situation, we want to have the answers. We want to be trusted by our subordinates, peers and leaders. Trust within organizations is based on both competence and character, but sometimes we value competence over character. Many of us have even sacrificed character to appear more competent than we actually were.

Not all careers are created equal

Our culture tends to promote the idea that if a person is at (fill in the blank) rank then they should know how to do (fill in the blank) tasks. But the reality is that not all careers are

created equal. Battalion commanders who came up in the ranks deploying every other year may not know how to train and plan for complex live-fire exercises. A field grade officer with a light infantry background might not understand the nuances of maintenance systems when they are the executive officer for a combined arms battalion. The rank of first sergeant might be the first time a NCO ever had to plan and synchronize resupply operations. For this reason, we should be honest with ourselves and those around us about our knowledge gaps.

When we fail to say, “I don’t know”

We place the mission and soldiers at risk. If we don’t understand how to run a live-fire exercise and instead of letting our boss know, we give him a thumbs up and then go through the motions, someone could get injured. Or if we don’t understand a maintenance program, yet we’re responsible for running one, we could negatively impact the readiness of the organization.

We limit our own growth. When we try to give off the appearance of knowing what we’re doing, we limit our ability to learn. We start believing our own lie and close ourselves off to maximizing development. In some instances, we may even invest more energy into hiding our ignorance than actually learning something new.

We hurt the culture of the organization. If we show by our personal example that it’s not okay to say, “I don’t know,” others will follow. Our subordinates will take their cues from us and do the same thing. If everyone is more worried about appearances over growth, the organization suffers.

If we want to foster a culture of learning and development within our units, leaders need to show those around them that it’s okay to say I don’t know.

But that’s only the first step

We then need to show others that we are working towards filling the knowledge gap by asking questions and showing that we are open to learning. Raters can also help in these areas as well.

In an interview with [The Military Leader](#), [Brigadier General Ross Coffman](#) suggests leaders have a candid conversation with their subordinates with a “What Don’t You Know” session. He says that by having this honest dialogue, senior leaders of the organization can then tailor leader development to the needs of individuals within the organization.

Leaders can also enlist the help of their subordinates. Not only does this foster a culture of learning in the organization, it also helps to increase trust. Some of the best leaders I’ve worked for possessed the humility to admit they didn’t have the answer and needed help understanding certain topics. Their honesty not only increased the respect of their subordinates it also made those subordinates feel valued as they helped educate the commander. Finally, If we are willing to admit we don’t know something and then enlist the aid of our subordinates to learn what we don’t know our confidence grows and their confidence in us grows.

The best leaders and organizations aren’t afraid to say, “I don’t know,” because they value learning over appearances. They welcome knowledge gaps because it offers them a challenge, and the opportunity to grow and develop. In the end, the trust we gain by being honest with ourselves and showing others that we want to improve will far outweigh the short-term benefits of looking the part.

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