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I grew up in an Army where pen and paper were as important uniform items as your pants. In the right hands, a pen and paper are powerful tools. As great as you think your memory may be, it's not perfect - you need to take notes. The most successful people I know have highly developed systems on how they organize those notes. There is no right or wrong answer on how to do this; however, there are best practices that have made me more effective over time.

Here are some tips that I provide to every new member of my team on how I approach this:

Use a notebook. You will lose the notecards, post-it notes, and random pieces of paper. The pocket organizer / journal / notebook market has exploded with tons of options to help people do this. All you really need is a durable cover and paper, the rest is just marketing

and a huge price markup.

Segregate by purpose. I maintain three notebooks at any given time, each with a specific purpose. The first is my reading notebook. I use it to capture notes or thoughts from whatever I'm reading. I found that there was no easy way for me to go back and review highlights and margin notes from the previous books that I've read. So keeping them all in a single notebook helps me go back and reference them more easily. The second notebook is dedicated to leadership observations and thoughts. I used to have these spread throughout various notebooks, and as I prepared for battalion command, I found that it was nearly impossible to find them. I now capture them in a single notebook. The third and final notebook is my 'uniform item.' This is the notebook I take everywhere - on vacation, the grocery store etc. I use this book to capture notes from meetings, to do lists, random thoughts or ideas.

Key things first.

Inside front cover. I write the start and end date for the notebook and what position I'm in. Under the dates, I keep all the key contact information for those I regularly communicate or the key leaders that I would need to call in the event of an emergency.

First few pages. I make a table of contents and number the pages in the notebook as I go. You can buy a notebook with pre-numbered pages but all the ones I've seen usually cost an extra \$5. Not a lot of money, but it's wasted money.

Last couple pages of the notebook. I keep track of every key event that happened while using the notebook. This could be a key training event, commander's critical information requirements, action brief etc. I've found this really helpful when writing awards and evaluations for subordinates, my evaluation support form, and more importantly, it serves as a quick reference to find things in my email inbox (don't forget to add the date to the event

ex. PLT LFX 7 JUL [platoon live fire exercise 7 JUL]).

Inside back cover. Every book recommendation I get I put here until I can add them to the app on my phone.

Organizing the notebook. I use sticky tabs to divide the rest of the notebook into a few sections. What sections you use depends on your job. Here are a few suggestions that have worked for me in the past:

Requests for Information (RFIs) - This is pretty self-explanatory, but anything I couldn't answer immediately when asked goes here so I remember to follow up with an answer later. As I started doing jobs where I wasn't a subject matter expert in the things I was being asked, I broke this into two sections: RFIs to my unit and RFIs from my unit. This helped me avoid multiple phone calls to people when I found another RFI a few pages later in my notebook.

Tasks - Things I have been asked to do or have tasked someone else to do. This also had the key information who gave the task, their suspense and who is responsible for answering.

Notes - Every meeting, video teleconference, chance encounter or random thought / suggestion. You won't remember it all, write it down. That is why you have a notebook.

Before I figured out the tabs, I tried using different color pens. I wasn't quick enough to change pens in meetings and ended up using up lots of paper by rewriting in the correct color later (and looked like a weirdo trying). I've tried using highlighters at the end of the day to do the same thing. That just made the ink smear and made it really hard to read. I found tabs to be pretty easy and you can move them around the notebook if you miscalculate the number of pages you need in a section (this is why the table of contents is important).

This is a pretty structured technique and will seem awkward when you first start. Most of the incremental changes I made came from awkward moments where I'm flipping through pages in a notebook to answer a question for my boss (or his boss). The structured system lets me navigate right to the information I need. Play around with different techniques to find what works for you. Don't be afraid to change up your system if it's not working - they are your notes.

LTC Jeremiah Hurley is an Infantry officer with multiple deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and other locations. He has experience from the platoon to 3-star joint headquarters level.

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