

Bring Back the 'Drink & Think'! Unleashing the Power of Professional Development



By. Chad Foster

Recently, a couple of very talented young majors introduced me to the phrase “Drink & Think.” This was the name they gave to the informal professional group discussions held among a small circle of peers while at the Command & General Staff College. The name these majors offered was new to me, but the activity to which they applied it was not. The US Army has a historical tradition of peer-to-peer informal discussion and debate. The stimulating exchange among fellow leaders in an informal setting has played a key role in shaping the intellects of many of our most prominent leaders in the past, and it should be playing such a role today. Unfortunately, Drink & Think seems to have become a distressingly uncommon practice among our junior officers. Many incorrectly perceive professional development as being almost the exclusive purview of one’s superiors or of the Army’s schoolhouses. Nothing could be further from the truth. Today’s young leaders must bring Drink & Think back to life.

Bring Back the 'Drink & Think'! Unleashing the Power of Professional Development

Drink & Think can take many forms. It can be as simple as two young company commanders getting together on a Saturday after watching some college football. Following the obligatory grilling and family time, the two of them huddle together on the back porch over a couple of beers (or sodas or whatever they wish to consume) to discuss the challenges of maintaining readiness for their units and for the Army as a whole. Drink & Think can also be more expansive, such as several battalion-level operations officers in a brigade getting together to discuss the merits and shortcomings of their Intermediate Level Education experiences in preparing them for the challenges of being a field grade officer. No matter the size or composition of the group involved, the defining characteristics of these gatherings remain the same:

(1) An informal setting - No “dog and pony show.” No authority figures to impress or to disapprove. This should be a time to relax one’s intellectual inhibitions and think outside the norms of orthodoxy. Participants are free to question even the most entrenched assumptions and to critique current policies and doctrine at all levels.

(2) Peers interacting as equals and professionals - No established hierarchy of rank. While natural leaders always emerge, nothing should infringe upon an individual’s ability to disagree, argue, and question within an environment of common respect. The term “professional” has a much deeper meaning than spit-and-polish or formal niceties. That term carries with it an obligation to open one’s mind to new possibilities and to never stop learning.

(3) A focus on topics of professional significance and seeing the “big picture” - Drink & Think isn’t just an excuse to get together and socialize (although that is an important thing to do as well). The purpose is to draw upon the ideas and thinking of the group in a constructive way. Don’t limit yourselves to immediate problems. Put these problems in context and talk about long-term, big picture issues that confront our Army and

our profession. Although there might still be much to learn, you are never too junior to start thinking big.

(4) A free and unfiltered exchange of ideas - There are no “sacred cows.” Everything is up for discussion and debate and even the most unorthodox of ideas merits critical examination.

Informal peer-to-peer discussion on professional topics is part of a long tradition in the US Army. Dwight Eisenhower and George S. Patton, Jr. engaged in regular Drink & Thinks during their time as junior officers in the years following World War I. At Camp Meade in 1919, the forward-thinking infantryman and the audacious horse cavalryman together pondered the future of warfare, planting intellectual seeds that would bear tremendous fruit in the decades to come. Specifically, they explored what roles the newly invented tank might play on the battlefields of tomorrow. Each officer came to his own conclusions. Eisenhower advocated better integration of armor into infantry divisions and Patton envisioned tanks maneuvering independently as a highly mobile striking force. During World War II, the ideas of both men would come to fruition within the American formations that fought to victory across Europe.[\[1\]](#)

Drink & Think is about creativity and growth. These gatherings are peer-to-peer professional development opportunities, not planning sessions. Although, if done right they contribute tangibly to the subsequent formulation of plans and solving problems of both the immediate and long-term variety. The informal nature and peer composition of Drink & Think are important. As Lindred Greer, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business points out, hierarchy within a group dynamic might produce efficient decision-making, but it also tends to stifle creativity. If creativity is the goal - and with Drink & Think that is certainly the case - the group “should include members of equal status . . . so that all members contribute.”[\[2\]](#) Doing so nurtures a collaborative environment and collective ownership of the professional development

process. In this way, each member of the group not only benefits personally but also becomes a stakeholder in the growth of his or her comrades.

Participants must feel free to present whatever they believe to be applicable to the discussion at hand, regardless of how different the idea might be. Innovation is never born from orthodoxy, and learning is stifled when avenues of inquiry are closed. Likewise, the merits of an idea are never fully clear until it is subjected to the bright light of debate. No matter how many assurances might be given, the presence of a superior – especially one of high rank – inspires an instinctive hesitancy on the part of junior leaders to speak freely. Part of the reason for this reaction is self-preservation. Not all superiors are as open to hard questioning and new ideas as they claim. Returning to the example of Eisenhower and Patton, both men received little besides frustration in return for publicly offering out-of-the-norm approaches to the employment of tanks in articles that they wrote during their days at Camp Meade. Patton held the rank of colonel in the Tank Corps but had to accept a return to the rank of captain in the horse cavalry as tanks were absorbed into the infantry branch and his ideas discarded.^[3] Worse still, Eisenhower was called to the office of the Chief of Infantry and directed “not to publish anything incompatible with solid infantry doctrine” under threat of being “hailed in front of a court martial.”^[4] The professional prospects of both men were endangered, at least in part, due to the “sin” of innovative thinking.

None of this is to suggest that senior mentors do not play a key role in the professional development of junior leaders. While Eisenhower and Patton had each other, they also had Fox Conner and George C. Marshall to help them along. But it was precisely because Eisenhower and Patton thought deeply, discussed freely, and debated intensely between themselves and with other officers of their rank that they were well prepared to maximize the developmental assistance provided by these senior officers. Neither Fox Conner nor George C. Marshall would have insisted that their protégées depend exclusively on them – or the Army – for professional growth. Conner’s own role models included men such as General Franklin Bell, a self-taught professional who struggled as a West Point cadet but

expanded his intellectual horizons through personal effort to the point where he read three different languages and ascended to Commandant of the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in 1903.^[5] For his part, Marshall greatly valued innovation. As Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School, he ordered that “any student’s solution of a [tactical] problem that ran radically counter to the approved school solution, and yet showed independent creative thinking, would be published to the class.”^[6] Independence, personal ownership of professional development, and creativity were clearly things that these two senior mentors admired, and all of them are central in peer-to-peer learning.

Today, peers are an under-utilized resource. End of course feedback from students at all levels of professional military education consistently lists in-class discussion with peers as among the most beneficial activities. Why then should young officers wait until they are in school at Fort Benning, Fort Leavenworth, or eventually one of the war colleges before they begin to exploit fully the intellectual benefits that peers provide? The answer is that they do not have to wait - and they should not. One of the tenets of Army Leader Development codified in Field Manual 6-22 is “supportive relationships and a culture of learning.”^[7] It is difficult to imagine an activity more in compliance with this tenet than one that brings young leaders together to discuss problems, challenge assumptions, and debate new ideas.

What can be done to encourage a return of Drink & Think to common practice? First, we can set the right example by engaging in the activity ourselves. If you are a Company Commander or a Major, try to organize your peers to conduct these sessions with a few of your own peer group. Make the events visible (but be careful that it does not become a staged production) so that others might see it and be inspired to emulate or to take part. Share the tangible results of your sessions with subordinates to illustrate their value. Second, as a possible participant in a Drink & Think, we can divest ourselves of the misguided notion that being action-oriented or being contemplative are mutually exclusive choices. Our nation needs to have its fighting done by thinking leaders. Lastly, and most importantly, we can stop waiting on someone else to develop us. Mentors are vital, but a

lecture from a senior officer is often not as valuable as the work put in by a group of serious-minded peers.

LTC Chad Foster is an Armor Officer currently assigned to the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. He commanded 4th Squadron, 10th US Cavalry at Fort Carson, deploying to Jordan and Europe during his time in command. He graduated from the National War College in 2018.

(Editor's note: The [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum](#) has adopted the name Drink and Think and hosts events all over the world that are similar to the description discussed in this article. Click on the link to learn more)

[1] Geoffrey Perret, *Eisenhower* (New York: Random House, 1999), 81.

[2] Amy Adams, "How Group Dynamics Effect Decisions,"
<https://news.stanford.edu/features/2015/decisions/group-dynamics.html>.

[3] Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers: 1885-1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 739.

[4] Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2002), 152.

[5] Edward Cox, *Grey Eminence: Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship* (Stillwater, Oklahoma: New Forums Press), 30-32.

[6] Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880-1939* (New York: Penguin Books), 256.

[7] US Army Field Manual 6-22: Leader Development, 1-1.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Pinterest](#)