



by Lennard Salcedo

Whether you are an assistant operations officer muddling through endless daily tasking orders or a company commander looking for opportunities to develop your platoon leaders, one key to success is the ability to assign tasks to the right leaders. Not only must you configure your team properly, but you also must know who accomplishes tasks efficiently. I use “sifting,” or assigning tasks to the appropriate level, as a method to alleviate work overload and invest in junior leaders. Sifting is a framework for assigning tasks to grow leaders and accomplish the mission.

Individual Sifting: Sorting Urgent vs. Important Tasks

The first step in task sifting is for leaders to understand which tasks are urgent and which are important, an idea frequently conveyed using the [Eisenhower Matrix](#). Then, leaders must use and implement this understanding to assign tasks to subordinate leaders within their organization. As a new officer, I frequently struggled with task management while serving as a squadron adjutant. My duties were different than those of a traditional S1. I worked directly for my senior rater with no supporting staff section and all tasks were mine to complete.

Initially, I tried to accomplish several tasks at once, hoping to make room in my work schedule for when the commander needed me. I quickly found that I was confusing important and urgent tasks. Important tasks, such as the dreaded Unit Status Report (USR), are best started once the rest of the staff accomplishes its portion of the task and is ready to provide the correct information. Understanding that important tasks deserve their own time and space for collective efforts helped me to prioritize my time in the interim on urgent tasks that the commander assigned to me.

This method allowed me to work effectively and focus more on fine-tuning products for my bosses. For my own reference, I began organizing my notes to outline immediate tasks, important tasks that could be delayed, and tasks that required me to hold others accountable since I was responsible for their overall completion. My notes looked like this:

1. Priority: Ensure all supporting documents for USR are prepared for the commander's review by the end of the day.
2. Weekly Closeout: Schedule a time to review unit funds with the executive officer.
3. Check: Ensure commanders submit their SITREPs on the shared drive for review by the executive and operations officers.

Task Management and Leader Development: Sifting Work as a Leader

Once you understand how you prefer to organize tasks, you can then sift tasks among your own leaders to manage workflow and grow your subordinate leaders. As I transitioned to my assignment as a platoon leader, I used this method to better communicate information to my NCOs. My previous methods worked for me personally, but now that I had a team, I needed to be able to share tasks. I was no longer a one-stop shop; I had capable leaders who could plan, resource, and execute tasks well, if given the proper tools.

I continued to use my green notebook and the aforementioned organizational method, but I began using a whiteboard in my office to highlight pertinent information for my junior leaders. This allowed them to seize the initiative, further delegate tasks if necessary, complete task on their own time, and most importantly, they could use this system to take ownership of our operations. Every task became an opportunity to grow and empower my team.

Platoon leadership could delegate routine tasks to more junior leaders. Providing junior leaders opportunities to develop their own leadership and learn their craft by leading others, rather than simply listening to instructions. Soon, I had specialists and sergeants who were not just executing tasks but leading others and developing their leadership styles as well. Sifting had shifted the workplace dynamic from working, to learning and growing.

Junior leaders improved their confidence and ability to think through how they managed their teams at work. My primary method for tracking information and task completion became the whiteboard in the platoon office, which I divided into the following sections:

1. Closeout Criteria: Daily or urgent tasks that had to be completed before COB, and which could be completed by leaders of any level
2. Check Tasks: Tasks that I wanted subordinates (typically E6 or E5s) to accomplish and

that required updates throughout the week

3. Weekly Tasks: Tasks that were typically delegated to senior specialists
4. Future Events: Significant events that would take place later that quarter and beyond. My platoon sergeant and I took responsibility for these events, since they typically required further planning and preparation before specified tasks could be delegated to subordinates

Cautions to Using Sifting

As with any other system, sifting is not a perfect method for managing and leading an organization. The system assumes that your leaders are capable of handling the tasks that you assign them. Some leaders require more oversight and mentorship to grow their ability to plan and lead. You must understand your team, and you may have to break-up more complex tasks into a series of smaller tasks to make them easier for your organization to accomplish.

Second, when higher headquarters issue incomplete orders or orders with unclear details, sifting may be counterproductive. In this situation, leaders cannot identify all of the tasks or assign them effectively. It can cause subordinates to take incorrect or no actions.

Incomplete plans be an opportunity to encourage leaders to be proactive, but it can also discourage ownership; encouraging and conditioning leaders to delay planning and wait on their higher headquarters to finish the plan instead.

In the case of incomplete or unclear orders, leaders should apply a measured task sifting process to develop their subordinate leaders. Leaders can anticipate or specify other tasks to their subordinates that must be accomplished by their organization. Leaders may not correctly identify all tasks, but they can still develop their team's ability to operate in ambiguous situations, both in garrison and in the field.

I believe task sifting is a useful model for leaders to implement leader development and stewardship in their organization. It changes tasks from routine work to opportunities for junior leaders to develop their own leadership skills. When implemented correctly, it can enable your organization to grow its junior leaders and prepare them for leadership at the next level. Use task sifting to start investing in your organization by giving junior leaders opportunities to lead, fail, and grow.

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