



By: Megan Jantos

As a commander, leveraging the unique capabilities of a public affairs officer can prove challenging. Sometimes leaders grossly micromanage the PAO with redundant or unnecessary product quotas because they jump to tactical solutions before identifying communication strategies. Other times, PAOs fail their commanders and act as “yes men,” taking on every grip-and-grin photo tasking while failing to communicate about more beneficial opportunities. Both of these result in numerous, yet purposeless products. If a commander is lucky the Army will assign them a knowledgeable PAO they can trust, and will advise the commander with candor. Still, trusting doesn’t relieve the commander of the responsibility to verify. So, how does a new commander quickly identify whether their PAO is properly supporting the unit’s mission and commanders are sufficiently enabling the PAO? I recommend starting with these 4 questions:

1-Does our unit have a communication plan? The plan should outline a goal that solves

an organizational problem or seizes an opportunity, all while nesting with higher headquarters themes, messages, and goals. Though not doctrine, I use the 6th Edition of [*Strategic Communications: Planning for Public Relations and Marketing*](#) to tailor the “plan” and “assess” steps of the Army’s operations process to communication. The most fundamental rule of communication is that you can’t NOT communicate. Even inaction communicates something (e.g. apathy). Additionally, *Army Regulation 360-1* requires commanders to develop plans that communicate effectively with key audiences. So, if they must communicate, then the organization needs a purposive goal, and I don’t mean “because the CG says we need to write two articles per week.”

2-Do our communication tactics support our communication objectives? Let’s assume the unit PAO is high speed, low drag and he has a purposive plan filled with creative products. These products (e.g. newsletter, Facebook post) must actually support the defined objectives. This means every picture, video, or written product ideally communicates a specific message to a particular audience. PAOs utilize a process similar to the decide, detect, deliver, and assess (D3A) targeting methodology. Think of every unpublished product as a wasted bullet on the battlefield. If the key audience doesn’t see the unit’s products the unit may as well fire nothing at all. Objectives encompass the following traits: specific, measurable, attainable, time-bound, and mission driven.

3-How are we measuring our communication plan’s success? For various reasons, public affairs shops often fail to move out of the “prepare” and “execute” steps of the operations process and into the assess or plan steps. A PAO shop that identifies measures of performance and effectiveness is an indicator of a successful operation. Conducting a media interview serves as a measure of performance. PAOs can determine the engagement’s effectiveness through assessing whether communications reached the intended audience.

4-Have I resourced/supported the PAO to complete the aforementioned

requirements? This is the most important question a commander can ask and explains some of the previously mentioned issues. Commanders support a communication plan when they ensure that the executive officer and operations officer incorporate updates into the unit battle rhythm. Many challenges stem from a combination of reduced on-hand personnel, available funds, network restrictions, low command priority, or inappropriate prioritization. Fixes for each typically require the commander to communicate their support to the staff through regular touch points. Unfortunately, many PAOs won't even ask for the commander's support for fear of sounding incapable. Worst yet, all the resources in the world won't help an incompetent or inexperienced PAO achieve success.

Commanders with PAOs lead vast staffs and require quick, simple ways to familiarize themselves during their first encounters. Whether the PAO arrives with answers in hand or desperately in need of guidance, these questions will give the new boss the answers they need to give refined guidance to one of their key communication advisors.

Megan Jantos is a communication advisor to military leaders and working women. She believes effective communication—a firm handshake or well-aimed bullet—can solve any problem. You can find her on Twitter @MeganJantos, crushing weights at the gym, or helping the nearest person unleash their potential.

This article represents her own opinions, which are not necessarily those of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the federal government.

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