



By Joe Byerly

When I was a company grade officer, I used to complain about the bastards up at squad. I remember thinking if LTC X or COL X only thought the way I did, we wouldn't have this problem. If I'm being honest with myself, it wasn't until I took on the role of field grade officer at the battalion and brigade level that I began to gain an appreciation for something we tend to miss at lower levels -the weight of leadership.

Commanders are responsible for everything. Their brains are filled with an unending internal monologue on how to best accomplish the mission; how to best empower the people under them; and how to mitigate risks and take advantage of fleeting opportunities.

Even for those who are the best at what they do, that's a heavy weight.

Making the Weight Lighter

If you look at the preponderance of articles online, they are about what leaders need to do to be better leaders. There should be more about what followers should do to be better followers as mission accomplishment is a two-way street.

As I reflect back on the mistakes I made as a follower and spend more time with senior-level leaders, I've found there are three things we can all do better to make that weight a little bit lighter for our commanders at all levels.

Put Problems in Perspective. In organizations, each of us are responsible for a piece of the pie, but the leaders above us are responsible for several pieces, and in some cases the whole pie. We need to keep that in mind when their decisions come into conflict with our interests.

Time, personnel, and energy are not limitless. Leaders have to make tough decisions and choose where to invest these precious commodities, sometimes at our expense. For example, a commander might decide to move enablers from our unit to another to address a developing threat. This decision may negatively impact our mission, but solve a much greater problem for the overall organization. Too often, we don't see it that way because we're hyper-focused on our own problems.

Okay, so what happens when their decision derails our mission?

Instead of allowing anger or frustration to cloud our judgment we should we take a step back and consider the greater picture, the factors that informed their decision, and the tools at our disposal to solve the problem ourselves. In doing so, we open ourselves up to clarity

as we consider the next steps. If we find that the risk we gained by their decision is too great for us to mitigate, we should then communicate that back to them. It's been my experience that most commanders are receptive when you articulate the risks and include recommendations vice "This sucks and I can't do it."

Don't take it personally. Staff officers and NCOs struggle with this one quite a bit because a lot of unrecognized staff churn goes into making organizations function. There are times when a staff will put in a lot of effort into something, only for it to go unused by the commander. As an executive officer, I had to keep in mind that we were the scratch paper to help our commander think through problems, and it was okay if he didn't use or agree with every single product we provided him.

In the end, we need to recognize that commanders have a lot on their minds. Everyone is working towards the same goal: mission accomplishment. We need to set aside our inflated or bruised egos and understand that our purpose in the organization is to push the organization forward not validate our existence.

Streamline communication. If you think you have to absorb a lot of information on a daily basis, the officers and NCOs in leadership positions above you are bombarded with way more. They have a tough job. They have to be able to sort through all the noise and make informed decisions. Therefore, it's helpful when we streamline our communication so we're brief and to the point, with the goal of helping them quickly digest what we've written or what we're saying.

To do this well, it helps to know what is "above the line" or "below the line" in communication. Above the line is all the information the leader needs to know to make a decision or form a judgment about a topic. Below the line is all the details that aren't necessary. These two characterizations change the higher up someone goes in the organization. What's above the line for a brigade commander is different than what's above

the line for a 4-star general. Too often, we include below the line content in our briefings or email communication and either muddy our message or lose the attention of the person we're trying to communicate with.

A Little Empathy Goes a Long Way

I've never been the perfect follower, but I'm learning that it helps when everyone is rowing the ship in the same direction. We might not have any influence on how the commander does business, but we have a lot of influence on our own outlook. When we start changing that, we gain empathy along the way and are able to see the weight of leadership.

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