



By Ryan Kendall

At the end of a National Training Center rotation, the Brigade commander said something that resonated with me. He said that at some point, we would have to come to terms with our experience in training. The lessons our organizations learned, how we as leaders made decisions, and how we adapted to the environment. To fully benefit from it all, we would need to reflect as individuals and as an organization. I found his concept so important, I used it as the theme for my last leadership development session with my pre-command course officers.

Coming to terms with our experiences is critical both on a personal level and as a professional. My last leadership development session with the officers in my squadron helped me do two things. It helped me synthesize what I had learned during command, and

it allowed my Soldiers to provide feedback regarding the decisions I made and our shared experiences as an organization.

I wrote this post to share my lessons learned as part of this process. The lessons below are universal and apply to all branches and types of organizations and across multiple levels of leadership.

Find the space and time to think

For most of my career I have moved from one position to the next without dedicating sufficient time to deliberately think about my upcoming job. I normally would conduct my handover and then feel my way through what needed to change or what I needed to do, relying on my intuition and recollection of previous experiences. I knew being a Squadron Commander was too important of a role not to dedicate considerable time and thought to every aspect of the position.

Throughout my time in command, not only did I benefit from having taken the time to think, more importantly, my Soldiers benefited from it. Command is an all consuming experience. Absent a clear idea of how you want to command and what you want your organization to be, you, as a leader, will lack the foundational principles to guide you. Your previous experiences will serve you well, but they will not be enough. Taking the time to think before you have the responsibility of command will undoubtedly make you a better leader.

Vision, culture, and climate

The idea of developing a unit vision is nothing new. The Command and General Staff College School for Command Preparation includes a block of instruction for developing a vision as part of its pre-command course. There are many definitions of a vision statement in leadership literature. For simplicity, I define a vision statement as a clear description of what your organization strives to be. As a guide, you should be able to say it in less than ten

seconds and it should use words with clearly understood meanings.

Of all the things I did in command, I believe this was the most important. Our vision statement was a powerful tool for me as a commander and our subordinates. Its power came from the fact that I did not own it; rather it was our team's idea. The development of a vision statement as a shared experience empowers your leaders to help you shape and grow your unit.

Define your culture and climate with your leaders. This process ensures your leaders understand your intent and that your Soldiers understand what you expect. Similar to the vision statement, use clear, concise language so that any leader in your organization can communicate it to someone else.

How to develop a vision statement and define your culture and climate is a larger topic that I will discuss in a separate post.

Energy

How you navigate the everyday demands of being a commander will dictate how successful you are at growing your organization and having a positive command experience. The Army has many different ways to describe this phenomenon: maintaining balance, juggling multiple balls in the air, riding the wave. Rather than subscribe to any of these, I find it more useful to think in terms of energy.

The demands on a commander are many. You will find these demands regularly consume you. Where is the best place for me to be? When do I need to provide guidance? What are the immediate priorities for our organization? Is my good idea too much to take on? Am I present at home enough? How is my family doing? Over the course of your command, these will ebb and flow depending on the situation.

All of these require energy, both from you and your organization. Energy is a finite resource; similar to the demands of the environment it ebbs and flows over time. As a leader you need to understand your energy level. How much energy do I have, and where do I need to spend it? Only you know how much energy you have, and how much you can provide at any given time. You have to dedicate energy towards the previously stated demands, but as much as possible you should make the decision of how much and when. This requires you to constantly update your energy running estimate, both what you have and what you need to give.

The same is true for your leaders and your organization. You have to be in tune with the health of your leaders and the organization. How much energy do they/does it have? By taking on this initiative, what are we not going to be able to do? Over the course of command, you will learn how much energy is required for certain things and you will learn how quickly it all adds up. If you think in terms of energy, you will be more judicious with it, and most importantly you will spend it as much as possible on your terms.

I found this helpful for establishing priorities and for setting expectations with myself. Additionally, it helped me find the right time for those things that I wanted to do, no matter what category (personal, professional) they fell into.

Do something original

The Army is a demanding place to work; it is harder when leaders do not identify those times when you can do something original. Especially in garrison, there are so many requirements and so many demands, it can make it hard to be creative as an organization. Many times it will feel easier to submit to the demands of the day-to-day. However, you will be missing an opportunity to provide your Soldiers with an experience that makes them want to be on your team, something that leaves a lasting impression and helps your organization develop a personality.

Original ideas do not always start with the commander. However, the commander will make the decision to expend energy to accomplish something that is not required. You will not be able to do everything that you thought of to make your organization unique, but you can choose one or two things that you are confident are going to be worth the energy.

Train your subordinates to talk and think in terms of risk

As a leader, every decision you make is going to involve some assessment of risk. If you are the only one thinking in these terms, your organization will be slow to adapt. Your subordinates will not use terms or think in ways that help you make the required decisions to move your organization forward. Therefore your organization will not be able to operate at the speed demanded by today's operational environment.

Training your subordinates in risk based decision making requires you to establish the terms of reference first. Terms that proved useful for us: risk to force, risk to mission, risk to inaction. In our Division, these became terms common to the entire chain of command. Rather than hold them at my level, I used them with leaders in our Squadron. This technique helped me make decisions, and when required, helped subordinate leaders effectively communicate challenges to senior leaders.

It's not up and out or down and in, it's side to side

If you are as fortunate as I was to have a chain of command that encourages teamwork, you must exploit it. This climate is for the betterment of not only your organization, but the Army as a whole. The operational problems you will face as a commander cannot be solved by any one entity. This rings true inside your own organization and with you as an organizational level leader. Part of your job as a commander is to find opportunities to help your larger team succeed. The organizational level relationships you foster will prove vital when adversity hits.

Teamwork is an active sport. You must make the effort to get to know the people to your left

and right. Find ways to bring your units together, whether in training or for leadership development, and create events that highlight ways you can work together. Share lessons learned with one another. It will quickly become apparent other commanders are facing similar issues (this helps you realize you are not the weird one). If you see there are larger organizational problems, work with your peers to find solutions and then find a venue to communicate those solutions to your senior leaders. Most importantly, do not worry about who gets credit. As soon as this becomes your concern, you are no longer being a good teammate.

Conclusion

There is plenty of literature discussing leadership lessons. With this post, I wanted to contribute to the discussion, while also ensuring I did not let the opportunity pass to grow as a leader. This post is the result of my deliberate effort to distill what I learned as a commander- to come to terms with the experience. This process, when performed collectively with those in your unit, serves as both an individual growth opportunity and a way to develop your junior leaders. While our instinct is to focus on the next experience or task, we do ourselves and those around us a disservice by not taking the time to reflect and share our lessons.

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