



By Scott Kelly

At 28 years old I took over my first command, and at 30 I woke up with a bad back. In December I got an MRI and found out I have three bulging disks which are causing an “extremely symptomatic” case of sciatica. Since college, physical fitness is something I’ve always taken pride in and has been an unspoken source of professional credibility where I work. Nobody wants to be the “broke guy” in a combat arms unit, especially as the commander. I’ve always viewed having an injury as a quick way to lose your job, fall behind your peers, and end your career as you become “noncompetitive”.

There are few career paths open for a company grade officer in the combat arms branches of the Army who is medically incapable of command. People I trust told me to hide it as best I could. They told me to push through my current assignment and rotate to a staff job where I could get the issue quietly fixed without anyone being the wiser. This would help me to stay “on track” with being competitive for promotion and future command. Instead, I went to my boss and told him my diagnosis, that I was starting physical therapy and pain management, and that I would be able to deploy with my unit when needed. To his credit, all he said was okay, keep me up to date on your prognosis.

Through physical therapy I’ve gone from 10% mobility to 40% mobility in my left leg in about 6 weeks. I’ve passed every physical fitness test my unit requires (which are extensive) and then some. However, I still feel a little silly, limping around my company area every day. I’ve still been doing our Monday morning 5-mile runs with my team, where the expectation is to finish under 40 minutes. I have a noticeable limp for the first mile until I’m fully warmed up, and the guys like talking shit about it as we go, but I still finish under time every time. I may not be doing it with the fastest guys in the group right now, but I’m not anywhere near the slowest either.

I post all my appointments on our work calendar, so guys know where I’m at, and to be transparent about what I’m doing and working through. It’s also is the best way I can make it clear to them it’s okay to be hurt; we will let you go get yourself fixed, and as long as you are making progress, and can still pass your physical fitness evaluations, it won’t be held against you.

We work in a physically demanding place, and there are only so many parachutes you can crash land with full kit on before this lifestyle catches up to you. Since admitting that I was injured, I’ve learned about three other guys on my team with similar issues. I found out they’ve been trying to keep their injuries off the radar and wouldn’t have said anything

about it if I hadn't been transparent.

Be transparent and humble

As leaders, our sincerity and transparency in action are more important than anything we will ever tell our guys. We need to be humble enough to act in the ways we want them to act, and not allow ourselves to fall into the trap of encouraging or tolerating behavior we find "acceptable" from them while we try to emulate something "higher". If we want guys to take care of themselves early and often so their small problems don't become big ones, they need to see us do the same, not act like we've got everything together all the time.

Make the time to heal

Too often as leaders we can act like a martyr to the never-ending list of work requirements we seem to have. I had been warned about this by senior leaders many times throughout my career, but never had to practice it myself, or fully understood the value of what they were saying. My injury has forced me to learn this lesson and taught me how much we are asking our soldiers to really do when we tell them to "go get fixed", or "go solve your problem", but don't deliberately help them make time to do it.

How we deal with setbacks is important

As leaders we must solve problems and bring out the best in people, including ourselves. We are not mascots for our organization's espoused values or shallow facades of an "ideal" team member. We must be tangible, imperfect examples of the messy and complicated intersection of the organization's priorities, an individual's aspirations and limitations, and life. As a military athlete my injury has been humbling, frustrating, and embarrassing. As a commander though, it's allowed me to demonstrate in a real way that setbacks happen, and its how we deal with them individually and as a team that matters. A bad back has made me a better commander, and openly going through treatment has made my team stronger. Sometimes, pain can be a true blessing.

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