



By: LTC Joshua Trimble

The Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) commissions the majority of officers each year (nearly five thousand) into the Army, Army National Guard and Army Reserves. More brand-new platoon leaders, fresh to the Army, are commissioned through ROTC than any other commissioning source in a given year. This year, a critical learning and training opportunity - Cadet Summer Training - was canceled at Fort Knox due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, Cadet Command is moving from a centralized to a decentralized training approach, leaving it up to individual ROTC programs to certify cadets. I remember Cadet Summer Training as a critical time in my development as a leader. This training reinforced teamwork, the importance of being humble, and leadership is an evolving process.

Showing up to your first platoon can be daunting for a brand-new butter bar. You want to prove your competence when, in most cases, this is your first crack at leading Soldiers. You hope you are assigned a competent platoon sergeant who is willing to mentor you. This test of your leadership abilities will be your first attempt to recall what you learned in ROTC.

With the current crisis altering Cadet Command's training approach, I am reminded of three pieces of advice my ROTC mentor taught our class. For those of you who missed the opportunity to spend the summer picking ticks off your appendages at Fort Knox, consider these three pieces of wisdom that are universal in command at every level and transcend beyond the military.

Own the problem at your level

If you've been around the military long enough, you are well aware the people at the next higher level are a bunch of [insert insulting word here], never understanding the situation you are actually in and having no clue about what to do about it. Misguided or confusing orders, inconceivable timelines and tasks, and general ineptitude seems to be the norm "from higher." Although you will likely experience similar frustrations in your own career, as a leader you should never use the "higher headquarters" excuse to give orders or fail a mission. Stand up, take charge, and own the problem at your level. "Well, because the [insert insulting word here] at [insert higher headquarters] told us to do this, we have to," should never be a principle reason to do something when issuing guidance to your team.

As a leader, you are in charge of the tasks and missions you've been assigned at your level, both specified and implied. Take charge. Take the misguided confusing orders and make the best sense of them. Handle the inconceivable timelines by prioritizing tasks and understanding that you may have to explain why you chose the approach you did. Be the leader at your level that your team needs and deserves.

Stand with your team

This mantra is most important at the first echelons of leadership. As a platoon leader, you may find yourself in the back of a company formation, waiting for the 1SG to call the company to attention. While you wait, it may be tempting to congregate with the other platoon leaders, swapping stories and proceeding to ignore your own formation. Your team and Soldiers will see this behavior and wonder if you are on a team with the other officers in the unit or on their team. Be the platoon leader who stands behind your formation. Save the storytelling with your fellow platoon leaders for after the formations have been dismissed. Show your team, and your platoon, that you are on their team and that you stand with them. These small gestures will enhance trust amongst you and your platoon, and it means more to them than you will at first be able to comprehend.

Never miss an opportunity to seize the moral high ground

Taking the moral high ground ranks up there with some of the best advice you can give someone - military or civilian. Using this technique, you can ensure you remain professional and keep your reputation intact. If somebody does something ignorant to you or your team, the appropriate response is never to come off the top rope with something equally or more

ignorant. Is the civilian at range control trying to exercise some authority they do not have in one of the rudest ways imaginable? Don't match their level of rudeness. Kill them with kindness and do not let them seize the moral high ground from you. The moral high ground, once relinquished, is nearly impossible to regain and, in many cases, may be your only negotiating power. Do you have a team member who is being insubordinate? React appropriately in a way that is professional and meaningful. Raising your voice for the rest of the world to hear is rarely an appropriate reaction, nor is creating ridiculous tasks to "prove you are in charge" or just behaving like a tyrant in general. Be professional, remain professional, and you will maintain the advantage and demonstrate to all your team members that you possess the emotional intelligence to be their leader.

Cadet Summer Training is a vital education cadets receive to be the leader our Soldiers need and deserve. While the pandemic may alter some of that training, we can share the lessons and wisdom that were taught to us years ago that still ring true today. Own the problem at your level, be with your Soldiers, and never miss an opportunity to seize the moral high ground. You will be fine, LT.

LTC Joshua Trimble is an active duty U.S. Army Signal Officer and has served in a variety of leadership and staff positions. A graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, LTC Trimble was commissioned through the Fighting Illini ROTC battalion. LTC Trimble also has an MS in National Security Strategy from the National War College, and an MA in Management and Leadership.

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