



By: Michael S. Burke

“What is headquarters thinking? Don’t they know we have training calendars and are short personnel? When I’m at that level I will make sure this doesn’t happen!” At some point in your Army career, the headquarters blame game may seem like an easy fall back when “they” issue a last-second tasking or ambiguous guidance.

However, this dangerous mindset can spread a negative attitude across the formation like a disease, festering and breaking down authority at all echelons. Imagine if after every directive a sergeant gives to his infantry squad, they pass the word to their team but follow it up with frustrations similar to the opening paragraph. Soldiers would lose faith in their leadership and their morale, confidence, and effectiveness would degrade. Complaining

about leadership ripples through the fabric of an organization and can tear it apart slowly without anyone even realizing before it's too late.

When faced with uncertainty coming out of your higher headquarters, you have another option to bring clarity to the situation. Ask three simple questions: What is headquarters trying to accomplish?; what is the higher HQ seeing that I'm not?; and what other problems is headquarters dealing with? This option requires maturity and teamwork and encourages a higher level of analysis, ensuring, in return, you provide your subordinates with clear direction and purpose while preventing the spread of negativity within your formation.

What is headquarters trying to accomplish?

The "why" behind every task is important. At the root of every task is a good intention. Most leaders are not just trying to make Soldiers' lives difficult. Breaking the task down to the core reason, may provide insight into the commander's priorities and current issues at the headquarters.

Headquarters may have reasons to not explicitly state the "why," like a short suspense or a lengthy explanation. Making the effort to gain shared understanding, rather than complaining, may change the subordinate's perspective. Headquarters staff work just as hard as subordinates and being questioned by subordinates at every turn can be frustrating.

When asking about the "why," begin with a positive approach. Asking a question in a defensive posture or by whining is often responded to with aggression or lack of empathy. If a subordinate shows frustration toward every task they don't like, headquarters will struggle to discern when there is a real problem. If someone saves their emotions for the most important objections or concerns, they are more likely to be taken seriously when they have a valid conflict.

What is the Higher HQ seeing that I'm not?

Your higher headquarters is dealing with a larger sight picture and a longer time horizon.. One piece of that picture might be trends across the entire organization. They are trying to help you without you necessarily knowing the why. Having the maturity to realize that they have everyone's best interest in mind will go a long way.

They may be just answering questions about your organization to their HQs or outside agency. Instead of burdening you with the details and follow up, they will just request information and close the matter. We have a tendency to automatically think the worst, instead we need to remember we are on the same team!

What problems is headquarters dealing with?

Subordinates' problems usually pale in comparison to the ones their headquarters usually are challenged with. An additional guard duty may ruin a Soldier's weekend and make maintenance harder for the platoon on Monday, but headquarters has to examine whether to evenly distribute the tasking or load it on one unit. An overreaction to what appears to be a single act of misconduct may be a trend not visible to a lower echelon. Due to its larger aperture, headquarters, by nature, has to consider more variables and examine a larger problem set than its subordinate units.

Communicating with peers, in a productive manner, may provide additional insight to the message and reason from higher. When interacting with headquarters, provide potential solutions, instead of just addressing the problem. Sometimes headquarters may plan in a vacuum and not have the time, resources, or perspective of subordinates. Communicating options in a calm, collected manner demonstrates the commitment to the organization and the mission without damaging the relationship between the organizations. When responding to orders or taskings, the 2d Cavalry Regiment's former Operations Officer, Major Ryan David, implements a phenomenal method. Every order, task, or directive is met without emotion. Instead, his staff analyzes by asking the three questions outlined above and

responds in one of three ways:

- The unit can support and here are some details we need to ensure the support is appropriate
- The unit can support but may assume risk to include impacting training
- The unit cannot support and here are the clearly articulated reasons why.

Underscoring this methodology is the concept of emotional intelligence. Every leader spend some time understanding this concept. A good place to start is with the book [*Emotional Intelligence*](#) by Travis Bradberry & Jean Greaves. The concepts in this book assists leaders with solving problems with a clear head and without complaint.

In times of uncertainty, it's easy to get emotional. The question you need to ask is "what will it accomplish?" Understanding headquarter's reasoning, messages, and challenges provides insights that lead to critical thinking of the problem and how to solve it, rather than complain. Leaders who understand this concept work better with their peers, subordinates, and headquarters to accomplish the mission.

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