



By Michael S. Burke

“Kick his ass!” was one of the multiple jeers I heard through the litany of booing as I stepped on the mat at Dragoon Fight Night, the 2d Cavalry Regiment’s combative showcase. A few weeks prior, I had posted a video on social media to over 4,000 Dragoons challenging any Soldier to fight their Command Sergeant Major. My opponent, Sergeant Zach Morrow, stood across the ring, he was 50 pounds heavier, nearly 20 years younger, and had a cage fighting record. I was about to be punched in the face.

Getting punched in the face is exactly what I needed and what the 700 people in attendance and those watching online needed to see. Often young leaders hear, “Never ask Soldiers to do something you are not willing to do,” but how do leaders, echelons above the most junior Soldiers on the front line, demonstrate this?

As NCOs and officers move up in positions the number of opportunities to exhibit leadership

by example diminishes. Getting past the fear of failure, identifying opportunities to highlight priorities with action, and understanding Soldiers are always watching their leaders provides us the chance to inspire and positively impact the formation.

As leaders, we cannot be afraid of failure. When Sergeant Morrow approached me about my challenge, I knew the odds were against me. I was overmatched and fully understood I could be twisted into a pretzel or even worse, knocked out in front of my entire formation. But why shouldn't I step into the ring? I didn't make it to this position without losing a few battles or failing occasionally. Fear of defeat or failure cannot dissuade leaders from setting the example, it should inspire them to be better!

Recently, two majors in the 2d Cavalry Regiment attempted to get their Expert Soldier Badge (ESB). As they passed event after event the staff buzzed with excitement. Here were two staff primary officers who had taken time out of their schedule, risking failure to earn something they didn't even need. They accepted risk and delegated responsibilities to ensure they could accept a challenge. Even after they failed on the third day of testing, their peers and subordinates saw them with a level of respect and admiration.

It would have been easier for those officers to avoid a challenge or risk of failure using busy work schedules as an excuse. Their evaluations were already written by their senior rater at that point. But they stepped in the ring and took a punch in the face earning respect and loyalty of their Soldiers even in failure. Any leader taking a risk and puts their reputation on the line is more inspirational than one who just shakes Soldiers' hands after a fight.

There are many ways officers and NCOs can set the example at all echelons of leadership. As leaders accept challenges, it provides them with an opportunity to highlight command emphasis. Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Fortenberry (United States Army Infantry School) earned his Ranger Tab between battalion and brigade command. It echoed the importance his command team placed on the fundamentals and leadership lessons all Soldiers, regardless of rank, can learn at Ranger School.

Recently, Command Sgt. Maj. Frank Lopez (Brigade Support Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division) earned his ESB. He didn't need it for a promotion or another badge on his chest. By earning it, he demonstrated to the NCOs and Soldiers the ESB is important and if he is willing to take a figurative punch in the face, so should every subordinate below him.

Soldiers always watch their leaders. They see the ones who "workout on their own" instead of joining them for challenging physical fitness training. Soldiers notice leaders who are

always in their office while they face blistering wind during weekly command maintenance in January or scorching heat during tactical drills in July. In addition, senior leaders have fewer chances to lead from the front. They must actively look for opportunities to get punched in the face.



After three brutal rounds, Sergeant Morrow connected with a perfect strike to my upper eye. While the physician assistance superglued my eyebrow back together an unsettling quietness took over the gym. When I stepped back onto the mat the crowd erupted, it wasn't about the Sergeant Major getting his "ass kicked" it was about a leader who accepted a challenge and wouldn't quit or accept defeat. A few minutes later, I stood beside Sergeant Morrow, the referee raised his hand. The standing ovation was the loudest of the evening. The audience didn't care their Command Sergeant Major was defeated, they were excited to see a good fight and a leader enter the ring and take a punch to the face.

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