



By Joe Byerly

Last week I traveled to Fort Knox to attend the [Battalion Commander Assessment Program](#) (BCAP). Initially, I thought of BCAP as merely an assessment of my leadership preparedness for battalion command. And while that is certainly the case, I was surprised to find that it was also an opportunity to grow as a leader and as a person.

While there, I found myself with more free time than I expected. Normally I would be frustrated with the down time but at BCAP, this time was a valuable part of the process. In fact, while talking to a peer about what each of us had learned about ourselves throughout the week, he mentioned reflection. At first, he was disappointed with the amount of free time built into the schedule, but then quickly realized he had a lot to reflect on and needed every minute of the provided white space to do it.

As I thought about his comment, it hit me. One of the major benefits of the Army's Commander Assessment Program is that it forces us to reflect and see ourselves for the leaders we truly are.

We don't reflect enough

Unfortunately, reflection is a lost art. Many of us are too preoccupied to make time for it. [Our smartphones](#), [social media accounts](#), and a number of other distractors keep us from [capitalizing on the quiet moments](#). Many leaders in the military struggle with this, too. Officers and senior NCOs move from position to position, sometimes every year. Once the final evaluation report is written, they trade one experience for the next, rarely taking the time to reflect on what they learned, where they excelled, where they fell short, and how they treated others. Also, reflection can be hard. I have several regrets about how I handled situations, and it is not always easy to revisit these moments.

Reflection works

Reflection is crucial to self-development. Dr. David Kolb, one of the most influential researchers in the field of adult learning, found that [reflection helps us make sense of experiences and extract lessons that we then use to grow and develop](#). The benefits of reflection have also proven beneficial outside the research lab. Leaders throughout history have used reflection as a means of working through problems and as a source of growth.

Almost 2000 years ago, a commander sat in his tent on the front lines of his unit's military campaign, jotting down notes to himself in his notebook. He wrote about past mentors and what he learned from each of them. He also captured thoughts on past interactions with people. He even reflected on the type of leader he wanted to become. These reflections, now known as the [Meditations](#), were written by Marcus Aurelius and not only helped him grow, they have also helped others grow down through the centuries.

So, returning to BCAP, how does it enable reflection?

BCAP drives reflection

There were several aspects of BCAP that enabled reflection. Many of the events required us to describe details of past experiences and make sense of those experiences as they relate to our strengths and weaknesses as a leader. Interviews and panels asked us to recount, and put into context, notable events that happened in our careers. In preparation, for these events, we sat alone in our rooms and thought about examples of successes, failures, and stressful situations. In doing so, we were able to extract lessons that we may have missed when we were in the moment.

BCAP also takes into account peer and [subordinate feedback](#). This feedback forced us to move beyond our own viewpoints in past situations and consider how our actions impacted other people. This type of reflection helps increase important facets of [emotional intelligence](#), to include relationship management and social awareness, and demands that we practice empathy in order to imagine how others saw us in these key moments.

Finally, the free time built into the schedule provided us an opportunity to sit and think. And that's not always easy. Blaise Pascal once wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from the man's inability to sit in a room alone." The daily schedule allowed us to do that, if we desired. This time away from home, work, and outside responsibilities gave me the chance for focused reflection.

There have been a lot of articles published on the Army's Commander Assessment Program over the last year including [one on HBR.org](#). And while many focus on managing talent, they miss one of the most important benefits of the program -reflection. It's one of the key ingredients for experiential learning, for increasing emotional intelligence, and all need to take the time to do it. In the forward to my buddy Mike Erwin's book, [Lead Yourself First](#), Jim Collins wrote:

Leading from good to great requires discipline -disciplined people who engage in disciplined thought and who take disciplined action. To engage in disciplined thought requires people who have the discipline to create quiet time for reflection.

I know there are still people who are yet to be sold on the value of The Commander Assessment Program for the Army. This new process is completely different from the legacy system. And although the previous system had its faults, it produced some talented officers.

While leaders continue to assess the long-term impacts of this change on the institution, and the opportunity to command hangs in the balance for candidates, the value for individual leaders is worthwhile. The Commander Assessment Program offers leaders an opportunity to reflect -a practice we could all use a little more of in our lives.

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