



By Brandon Temple

My career has been uniquely joint. I enlisted in the Air Force as a member of Tactical Air Control Party (TACP), an inherently joint career field. I spent the last five years of my enlistment in the joint special operations community. I then commissioned in the Navy as a Surface Warfare Officer. After two years in the Navy, I transferred back to the Air Force as a TACP officer. I spent my last assignment as a captain on staff at Joint Special Operations Command. My career path is an oddity. Over the years, I learned a few valuable lessons from both the enlisted and officer perspective which can help junior officers who may find themselves in a joint assignment.

Close the gap

Staff positions within a joint command are typically billeted for senior O-4s and above. Thus, the majority of officers within a joint command have a great deal of staff experience, in addition to the formal education many received at service command and staff colleges. In a joint staff billet, Junior officers must close that knowledge gap quickly and learn the art of staffing.

Junior officers are technical experts, not staff experts. They are comfortable writing and briefing at the tactical level. Some adjustments must be made on a joint staff. Clear and concise communications is key. In a joint headquarters, the commander is often wearing multiple stars and their time is valuable. Do not waste it with superfluous details. For example, the average tactical level CONOP can often exceed 30-40 slides. It is the staff's job to "executize" the CONOP, so only the most pertinent information is reaching senior decision makers.

In a joint command, junior officers will brief a range of leaders including general officers, senior civilian leaders, congressional staff and members of Congress. There is an art to briefing senior leaders in the joint environment. The key is knowing your audience, the intent of the brief, and your command's equities. For example, when briefing a senior Army officer, they will likely understand your military jargon while a congressional staffer may not. As for intent, consider if the brief is for information, discussion, or decision. When briefing outside of the command, you must know and understand your command's intent and equities.. You represent your command when you brief. Finally, never make promises you are not authorized to make.

Role of NCOs in joint junior officer development

Behind every great junior officer is a great NCO. Enlisted leaders have years of tactical and technical experience, not to mention the skill of navigating administrative bureaucracy. NCOs must understand their charge to develop junior officers. Likewise, junior officers must

understand the importance of NCOs in their own development. These truths also apply in a joint command.

In a joint command, a junior officer may be paired with an NCO from a sister service. This partnership is an opportunity to share, train, teach, and mentor one another on each other's unique service culture and doctrine. For example, in the Navy, enlisted, senior enlisted, and officers eat in separate dining areas. This tradition may strike Army and Air Force personnel as odd the Navy would not have it any other way. Each service organizes, deploys, and commands and controls their forces in a unique way. Understanding these differences and the way they tie together for joint force employment is critical. In my experience, this knowledge is what serving in a joint environment is all about. Discussing differences in service cultures and doctrine builds joint understanding and increases joint force effectiveness.

The joint environment is a treasure trove for leadership tools, and our NCOs are key in providing that development. Our junior enlisted face several service-agnostic issues. Integrating into military life, financial responsibility, starting a family, etc. are common issues among our newest service members. Learning how each service builds these foundations and handles departures from good order and discipline is an invaluable resource. NCOs are on the frontlines. Junior officers must use this opportunity to build their awareness and add tools to their kit they may not receive from their own service.

Professional development in the joint environment

The day-to-day grind of military life is enough to bog anyone down. Often, we have too many tasks to accomplish in the time available. In a joint command, this condition seems more pronounced. There is always something that needs to be done immediately. As you tackle a long range calendar full of events and put out fires, it's easy to forget about professional development. Using the simple methods below, junior officers will tap into joint knowledge that is just as valuable, if not more, than what they can learn in formal joint professional

military education.

In a joint command, professional development starts with conversations. Joint staff are full of senior officers/enlisted with years of experience. Junior officers must tap into this joint knowledge by asking questions and having discussions. Sit down next to the Army colonel and ask “Why does the Army do that?” Ask your boss, “Why do you think the Commanding General made that decision?” This is an effective method of professional development that does not require adding blocks to the long range calendar. Don’t be shy, get out there, ask, and learn.

The most effective means of professional development in the joint environment is simply listening and taking notes. *From the Green Notebook* started with this idea in mind. So, have that notebook at the ready. Take notes, pose questions to yourself in writing, and explore the answers on your own. This method develops the skills of professional inquiry, self-study, and will lead to deeper conversations when used as a foundation for the interactions discussed in the previous paragraph.

Applying candor and clear lines of communication

Candor is about being open and honest. In a joint staff environment, a lack of candor on the part of a junior officer can be disastrous. A familiar scene in a joint command is a senior leader, perhaps a general/flag officer, providing feedback to a junior officer on a staffing effort. “Does that make sense,” the leader will ask. The junior officer responds with a head nod and a “yes.” Often, the junior officer did not understand the guidance but agreed to keep the brief moving and avoid looking foolish in front of a general/flag officer.

In the scene above, the junior officer leaves the brief unsure of where to go next. They fight through it the best they can only to come back to the senior officer and have the effort fail to meet the commander’s intent again. This misstep can be avoided by employing a little candor. If you do not understand direction, guidance, or intent, you must be honest about it.

Ask probing questions to gain understanding. Restate your understanding of what the senior leader said to you. This practice streamlines the staffing process, builds shared understanding, opens lines of communication, and will save you time and sanity.

Lines of communication, however, run both ways. Senior joint leaders must develop a culture of openness and innovation. I worked for a general officer who would brief newcomers that he had been in the military for 33 years so new ideas were not coming from him. With a little self-deprecation, this general officer communicated his intent that all members of the command were charged with innovation and the door would be open to all ideas, regardless of rank. Junior officers must seize upon this openness when presented and provide candid professional feedback to leadership when they feel their voice is not being heard.

In closing...

Shortly after arriving at JSOC, my staff director tasked me to be an action officer for a visit to the command from a senior leader in the DoD. Prior to the visit, I briefed the Commanding General (CG) on our plan. My brief went through many iterations with the staff, where it was “executized” to just 2-3 slides. I worked with the staff and our liaisons in the Pentagon to understand the intent of the visit, both from the visitor’s perspective and from the command’s. These interactions gave me my first lessons on being on staff in a joint command. They quickly allowed me to close the gap between my tactical and staff knowledge.

I asked other action officers, who had planned similar visits, about their experiences to build my understanding. I asked senior staff officers questions to help guide my planning. I took copious notes in the engagement synchronization meeting on how other action officers were handling their visits. When it was my turn to brief at the sync, I provided a concise update, received feedback, and asked probing questions to make sure I understood the commander’s intent. My NCO had seen several of these events and he provided valuable

insights on how the NCOs and junior enlisted members of the command could support the engagement.

This staff effort, which took weeks of planning, culminated in a 10-minute brief to the Commanding General. At the end of the brief, the CG walked over, shook my hand, and said “Great job,” and that was that. The visit went well, and I moved on to other tasks and problems. That anecdote is the joint environment in a nutshell. Weeks of staff effort and churn, culminating in a brief moment of execution; then you move on. However, this one event was my first lesson as a junior officer in a joint command. Throughout my time in the command, these same lessons appeared time and again. Close the knowledge gap with the senior staff officers, learn from your NCOs, take ownership of your professional development, and communicate with candor. The list is not exhaustive to be sure, but it is a great start!

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