



By Danita Darby

In February 2019, I lost my company. I was suspended because I was suspected of counterproductive leadership, also commonly referred to as 'toxic leadership.' Leaders accused of counterproductive leadership may display abusive, self-serving, erratic, and corrupt behaviors, as well as, leadership incompetence. At the conclusion of an investigation, I was found innocent. I am not a toxic leader. While I lacked mentorship and counseling, I know there were facets of my time in command I could have done better. Within this post, I will not focus on the details and complexities of the investigation that prompted my suspension. Instead, I want to focus on what I could have done better as a commander and share my lessons learned with other leaders.

In 2018-2019, I was a company commander of a Military Intelligence company deployed to Afghanistan. We deployed as a company and then dispersed to remote locations in order to provide intelligence support to various organizations. I led the company from July 2018 until February 2019 before being accused, investigated, and suspended for being a toxic leader. Since my suspension, I spent a significant amount of time searching myself to figure out what I could have done better.

There were some initial indications that the Soldiers in my company felt stressed and undervalued based on my first command climate survey. The results of the survey suggested some of my Soldiers felt like their voices were silenced within my company. After many failed attempts to improve my relationships within the command, I was left completely unsure how to remedy the situation. This post seeks to provide an after action review and lessons learned of my experiences in command to help other officers recognize when they need help and avoid my leadership mistakes.

The purpose of Army leadership, by definition, is to inspire and influence people to accomplish a mission, whatever it may be. The Army leader must possess and aptly apply the leadership attributes and competencies of Character, Presence, Intellect, Leads, Develops and Achieves. These are foundational characteristics, without which Army leaders may struggle to successfully influence their organizations. Leadership is an art, as well as a science. The science of Army leadership is plainly and succinctly explained in Army doctrine, but the art of leadership is much more difficult to pinpoint, explain, and execute. We know it when we see it, but how do we teach it and exemplify it as leaders?

The art of leadership lies in ownership. If a Soldier is given full context to mission requirements and allowed the ability to provide solutions, he or she will be more invested in the organization. During my command time, I owned the mission in its entirety. I often neglected to elicit recommendations from others and provide context to mission tasks. I lacked experience in balancing mission accomplishment with leader development. I became so focused on accomplishing tasks in support of the mission, I forgot to provide opportunities for my subordinate leaders to share their ideas and provide solutions.

My Soldiers appreciated my disciplined nature, my objective outlook on mission tasks and ethics, but they did not feel valued. Ironically, my attempt to preserve order and mission success led to a very negative climate and a great risk to mission. I should have encouraged critical thinking, listened, and considered my Soldiers' suggestions and recommendations thoughtfully.

For example, my sister company commander provided context for his Soldiers routinely,

discussed all contingencies, and considered all options as they were presented to him. He empowered his Soldiers to take ownership of every mission. They each felt they had the ability to give significant input for mission planning and execution. As a result, he was well respected by his company and he successfully accomplished the mission.

In past duty positions, I was often lauded by my peers, subordinates, and superiors as being tactically proficient but also humble and empathetic. All of my evaluations indicated I possess the Army's leadership competencies and attributes. However, despite my previous accomplishments and my grasp on the science of leadership, I failed to empower my subordinates and allow them a sense of ownership over their assigned tasks. My Soldiers needed to understand mission requirements thoroughly and own the solutions to their individual squad and platoon problem sets. I failed to provide that for them.

As previously stated, following my first command climate survey, I clearly understood that I had a problem to solve with no easy solutions. My first sergeant and I acknowledged our Soldiers' concerns and complaints. We heard them and we cared deeply for them and the mission. We established an anonymous platform for them to express their concerns. We visited with our Soldiers as often as we could. We called our collection teams to see after their wellbeing, rather than just checking up on the status of task completion. All of these attempts were met with stiffness. This strain in the relationship existed because I made decisions without asking for input from the rest of the team. I wrongly assumed that giving up some ownership would detract from my command presence and distract my organization from what was important.

In my time as a company commander, I failed to leverage my team's competence, confidence, and intellect. This oversight could have resulted in complete mission failure. Following my suspension, my company carried on the mission without fail. Standards and discipline I instilled helped to partially advance the company, however it would be arrogant of me to presume the company's success was reliant on my leadership. My Soldiers possessed the mettle and ability to continue on without me. They are the reason the mission was successful.

Up until this point in my career, I had always been successful. I understood the science of leadership but I was lacking in the art. Simon Sinek, author of [\*Leaders Eat Last\*](#), explains the art of leadership. A leader must "share what they know, ask knowledgeable people for help performing their duties" in order to lead successfully. In doing so, Soldiers become invested in the mission personally and feel empowered by their superiors. If I had enabled my subordinates to challenge my assumptions and to ask questions, I would have had a clearer understanding of each task and my Soldiers would have felt heard. Mission success

is the company commander's responsibility but it takes a holistic effort to ensure that success.

To future company commanders, do not make my mistakes. Avoid the temptation to bark orders, expecting your Soldiers to blindly follow. Give the youngest leader a seat at the table and ask them for their opinion. As time allows, give as much context behind your orders as possible. Tell them what you think and then make a decision. You will be held accountable for all of your decisions and actions but your Soldiers will support you because they have taken ownership of those decisions and actions, too. This is the art of leadership that cannot be taught, but can certainly be mastered.

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