



By Josh Bowen

A mentee of mine who recently graduated from West Point and just completed her Basic Officer Leadership Course finally arrived at her first duty station. Exciting!

Unfortunately, due to our current COVID-restricted environment, she has to quarantine for 14 days. Ok - quarantine is never fun, but she understands the need for it. Her new unit put her up in the installation's designated quarantine barracks and assured her she would be provided with everything she needed to survive the next few days in isolation.

The morning after she arrived, she received her first meal from the dining facility (DFAC) by delivery service. While she was grateful for the support, the meal was pretty rough - one hard-boiled egg, two sausage links, and a cup of rice. The unit and the DFAC are doing their best to support, so she appreciates the help and understands the challenge of feeding in

these unique circumstances.

Now, the first duty day of her quarantine arrived and she received a Microsoft Teams link to access her virtual in-processing classes. Great, she thought. Now she can be productive during her quarantine; except there is a problem. The link is broken and she misses her first whole day of in-processing because she never received support or a corrected Teams link. Piled on top of all these challenges, she has limited contact with her assigned sponsor and no correspondence from her unit leadership. So, she is justifiably feeling a bit lost and struggling to maintain excitement about joining her first unit. If she's being honest, she is not feeling overly welcomed or valued. Unfortunately, this integration into her first unit isn't the one she envisioned for years as a Cadet.

As military leaders and professional units, we need to be deliberate in these opportunities. While COVID-19 has created numerous restrictions and challenges for our units, it has also created unique opportunities - ones that we need to identify and capitalize on.

Socialization: Leaders Creating a Sense of Belonging

This COVID-driven quarantine story I share targets organizational socialization, also known as new member on-boarding. For the purposes of this article, I define socialization as the ongoing processes (both formal and informal) that a unit enacts to transform members (new and existing) so they learn, identify with, and internalize the norms of the unit. These unit norms include the identity, customs, values, knowledge and expertise, expectations and standards, and roles and responsibilities of what we consider to be an ideal unit member. **Socialization is also about creating a sense of belonging** - showing our people that they are valued, appreciated, and that they undoubtedly belong to the team.

In looking at the specific circumstances quarantine requirements create for members joining our formations, I want to challenge our unit leaders across the military to consider

the following as ways we deliberately socialize these new members into our teams. I believe many of our units can better seize the socialization opportunity created by quarantine requirements for our new leaders when they arrive.

Proposal: Ideas to Be Deliberate in Socializing During Quarantine

While there is no *right* way to go about this, I propose a number of ideas that units can act on. We are looking at a 14-day window where our people are completely available, otherwise unengaged, and excited to join a new team. This set of conditions presents a great opportunity to create a sense of belonging for our new teammates.

- **Education Curriculum:** It's 2021; we have digital tools at our fingertips to create a series of recorded videos stored on a cloud or share point platform accessible to new arrivals (looking at those capable S6 wizards). The effort is self-sustaining once recorded and is just a matter of making them accessible. Consider the topics you would want to educate our new members on: lessons on the unit's history, mission, commander's intent, organizational structure, standards and expectations, etc. The list is nearly endless. Think about the topics that are most important to your unit and leaders. Let's start there and educate your new arrivals on them so they are well informed. Informed Soldiers are effective Soldiers.
- **Reflection Opportunity:** Does the unit have core values, beliefs, or philosophies that you want people to identify with? Consider quarantine a chance to offer structured reflection prompts to have new members think through to encourage them to internalize and align with the unit's ideals. This homework gives them the chance to process and make meaning of ideas, rather than merely receiving new information, which can be exhausting.
- **Equip Them with Resources:** Do you have unit material you want them to read before arriving at the unit? This list can include doctrine, the unit tactical standard

operating procedures (TACSOP), unit policies, or even a book if certain units run some form of a reading program. Outline a directed and/or recommended quarantine reading list and equip them with the necessary resources.

- **In-Process Tasks:** In-processing to a new unit is not a fun or engaging task. Many of those tasks can be done virtually, like on-line training modules. Create an opportunity to complete those tasks to help reduce the in-processing burden as much as possible.
- **Leader Social Hour or Meet-and-Greet:** All of the above ideas can be super helpful. However, none of them provide an opportunity for new members to engage with another live human being, let alone a formal unit leader. I see no better way for a unit to show a new member they care about them than having our leaders available for some unit virtual social hour or meet-and-greet. This networking event can be as simple as ending the duty day with a live MS Teams meeting room where members in quarantine can log-in to interact with key leaders from their unit. They can ask questions, get faces to names, and more. This session would demand time from leaders who already have a large time burden but it could be a shared responsibility. For example, for an Army brigade, different leaders can rotate based on the day of the week, making the commander available for 30-min to an hour on Monday, the CSM on Tuesday, XO on Wednesday, battalion commanders on Thursday, etc. You could make this a unit battle rhythm, that while a little demanding for busy leaders, can have a huge payoff on the integration of new members. This event could be the icing on your unit's "socialization cake" in creating a top notch on-boarding program and a sense of belonging for incoming soldiers.

There are myriad ways units can go about these ideas, but the platforms, systems, and time exist and are readily available, if you make people a priority. We must be deliberate in creating a program around this idea to ensure it is high-quality and successful. Ultimately, I see no better way to show our incoming members and leaders that we care about them, are excited for them to join the team, and show them that they belong.

Josh Bowen is a 10-year Army officer currently serving at the United States Military Academy. He is passionate about making people and organizations better through leader development. He is the founder of [3x5 Leadership](#), which is an online resource to help better equip and inspire emerging leaders through their leader growth journey.

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