



by Dan Vigeant

Leaders worth following are readers. This is not an original, or even new thought. Countless General Officers, business professionals, and thriving entrepreneurs laud the benefits of reading for personal and professional growth. *From the Green Notebook* even publishes a monthly reading list for the sole purpose of developing aspiring leaders (if you're not already a subscriber, I highly recommend you click [here](#)). However, with the number of books dedicated to leader development and the Profession of Arms, knowing what to read can sometimes feel daunting.

To be clear, I am no expert on the subject. I am, however, a student of the Profession of Arms and sincerely believe commanders owe the Americans they serve the best version of themselves. As such, and in preparation for receiving the guidon, I embarked upon an eclectic reading journey focused on one central theme: leadership. The following is a short list of some of those books that prepared me mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for company-level command. My hope is that this list will assist in your preparations for what

will be the most rewarding, albeit challenging, experience of your career.

Marcus Aurelius, [*Meditations*](#) (first century AD)

Company command is the first time in a military leader's career where responsibility and authority combine to create a sense of importance for the person with "commanding" in their signature block. It's also the first time for many where ethical decision-making and humility are truly tested.

Prior to taking command, I knew nothing of *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius (short of his fictional appearance in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*), or Stoicism. However, I did remember reading an article in which General (Ret.) James Mattis [recommended](#) that every American should read this book at least once in their lifetime. This, coming from one of the most respected military leaders of our generation, was advice worth paying attention to.

Ironically, *Meditations* was never intended for publication and served Aurelius as a private journal for reflection and deliberation. The private nature of this journal is its greatest strength; it offers us a rare, unfiltered glimpse into the mind of one of history's most revered leaders. As a commander, *Meditations* prepared me emotionally and spiritually to ethically serve my organization, always remain humble, and dwell only on the things within my sphere of control.

Of note, there are multiple translations of *Meditations* found online; picking the right one is key to understanding the book. The Gregory Hays translation of [*Meditations*](#) is an easy read and Hays' provides an introduction that offers readers a background and context to the book. Regardless, if you read only one book on this list, make sure it's this one.

Arthur S. Collins, Jr., [*Common Sense Training: A Working Philosophy for Leaders*](#) (1978)

“Leadership is so much a part of the conduct of training that at times it is difficult to tell where one stops and the other starts...”

- Lt. Gen (Ret.) Arthur S. Collins

Unit training is challenging and can often be frustrating to accomplish; time will always be a commodity in short supply and the training area will either be unavailable or too restrictive to accomplish your objectives as you envision them. However, these challenges are not insurmountable and most-often just require creativity and a solid understanding of the training environment.

Common Sense Training was written in 1978 but is just as relevant in 2021 as it was at first publication. Throughout the book, Collins offers two maxims that remain highly relevant today. First, training is the number one priority of a peacetime army, and second, commanders set the tone for their respective training environments. In this environment, [commanders](#) communicate intent, uphold standards, foster a conducive training environment, and limit distractors. Ultimately, they are responsible for the readiness (or lack thereof) of their organizations.

Common Sense Training better prepared me to holistically analyze the training environment, identify and adapt to training hurdles, and inject practical techniques throughout my short- and long-term training plan.

David Marquet, [Turn the Ship Around!: A True Story of Turning Followers into Leaders](#) (2013)

Commanders are accountable for everything within their assigned scope of responsibility. However, many leaders are misled to believe this requires them to exercise complete authority over their organizations. If they fall into this trap, they are often left with an organization of subservient followers that are unable to think or act for themselves.

Turn the Ship Around! challenges this notion and asks leaders to give away control in order to create an environment for subordinates to take initiative and ownership within the organization. Stated another way, commanders should cultivate a culture where everyone has a stake in the success or failure of the team.

In *Turn the Ship Around!*, Marquet, a United States Navy submariner, tells his personal story as the captain of the *Sante Fe* and how his radical approach to leadership transformed his submarine from worst to best in the fleet.

Reading his book greatly assisted me in developing my own command style, avoiding the pitfalls of micromanagement, and developing leaders who are ready to step up and lead without someone standing over them.

For an abbreviated, interactive supplement to the book, check out Marquet's presentation [here](#).

Lee Cockerell, [Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney](#) (2009)

People want to be a part of an organization where they feel like they are a valued member of the team. Often, in organizations with poor command climates, individuals feel like their voices aren't heard and their opinions aren't valued. These organizations are easily identifiable through their substandard performance, increased behavioral issues, and general lack of cohesion.

Conversely, anyone who has ever vacationed at a Disney Park is no stranger to their amazing customer service. The employees are proud of their organization and, in turn, strive to make every customer experience memorable. It is engrained in the company's culture and permeates into everything they do. Searching for insight into establishing a similar culture in my organization, I picked up Lee Cockerell's *Creating Magic*.

Cockerell is the former Executive Vice President of Operations for the Walt Disney World® Resort and has over 30 years experience in the hospitality industry. His book, *Creating Magic*, is a series of vignettes told throughout his career that stress the importance of inspiring employees and achieving amazing organizational results.

Moving beyond just leadership theory, *Creating Magic* armed me with a number of practical leadership strategies that could be implemented immediately. After reading his book, I was better prepared to practice authentic leadership, emphasize that everyone's opinion was added value within the organization, and demonstrate that the smallest gestures usually have the largest impact.

Jim Frederick, [*Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent Into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*](#) (2010)

Without a positive leadership presence, unit cohesion can work against an organization. The team dynamic present in many military organizations can quickly take a wrong turn when standards aren't upheld and leaders choose to remove themselves from the equation.

Black Hearts tells the story of a platoon within the 101st Airborne Division deployed to Iraq in 2005. While deployed to Iraq's "Triangle of Death," members within the platoon commit some of the most heinous war crimes of modern history. It is a case study in the failings of leadership and the trickle-down effects this can have on everyone in the organization.

Like many of the books on this list, *Black Hearts* caused me to reflect on my leadership style. After reading this heart wrenching story, I understood the necessity for leader presence (especially at friction points), the importance of upholding basic standards, and the causal effects of toxic leadership.

James Clear, [*Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*](#) (2018)

Command will require a significant amount of your time and energy. Successfully balancing the numerous requirements associated with leading an organization will require you to establish good, effective habits and shed counterproductive, bad habits.

Atomic Habits, written by one of the world's renowned experts on habit forming, offers simple strategies devoted to increasing productivity, optimizing your lifestyle, and staying motivated through the challenges you will certainly encounter.

As a commander, it helped me to focus on where I fell short and ultimately improve the way I led my organization. The numerous requirements associated with command (training, personnel management, evaluations, awards, etc.) require efficiency and basic organizational skills. By nature, I sometimes struggle with these skills; *Atomic Habits* helped me become a more efficient and productive leader by building good habits that, in turn, made me a more effective leader.

If you enjoy *Atomic Habits*, I highly recommend you check out jamesclear.com for further reading.

[Your] Organizational History

Whether at the top of a mountain or on the open ocean, the military has a proud and storied history. It is safe to assume the organization you are about to command has an equally rich history. As a leader, it is important to [study this history](#) in depth for too many reasons to cover in this article. However, as a commander, it is important to study *your* unit history to give weight to your undertaking, provide context into the culture you are about to assume, and instill humility as that organization's temporary caretaker.

I was lucky enough to discover that my company traced its lineage to a group of aeroscouts flying low and slow along the Cambodian border during the Vietnam War. The book, [Low Level Hell](#) by Hugh L. Mills, filled me with a sense of humility to carry on the reputation this

organization earned, and, although that era's Soldiers were long removed, insight into their foundational culture.

Prior to assuming command, I highly recommend you pick up a book on your division, brigade, or (if you are lucky) company history. At a minimum, do some online research to try to understand the lineage, culture, and traditions that make your organization unique.

Dan Vigeant is an active-duty Army Officer and the Editor-in-Chief for [From the Green Notebook](#). He enlisted in 2004 and received his commission as an Aviation Officer from Arizona State University in 2014. He has published articles in Army [Aviation Digest](#), [Marine Corps University Journal](#), and the [Journal for Advanced Military Studies](#).

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