



by Jason W. Hughes

Incoming commanders and command sergeants major have spent the last year attending pre-command courses (PCC) to reflect on their values and how they will lead their organizations. One of the most valuable exercises at PCC is the Soldier/spouse family contract - an exercise that forces leaders to think through how they plan to operationalize People First.

The family contract exercise consists of sitting down with your family and laying out what events are “fenced off” during command and activities you will commit to on a routine basis. For example, our contract had family dinner two nights a week and a family lunch after mass each Sunday.

After you write everything out on butcher block, you brief your contract to the class. Everyone is joking, happy, and hopeful that they can execute as briefed. Unfortunately, many commanders fail to provide this contract to their boss upon arrival at their new duty station. Therefore, it is not executed as intended.

While the Army rolled out its People First [strategy](#), I reflected on ways I could reinforce

balance for my field grade officers and commanders. I directed each to sit down with their spouse and come up with a family contract. I also called each spouse and told them about the assignment and my intent behind it - that leaders were truly present while at home.

I sat down with each leader and reviewed their contract to ensure it was supportable. Some had a few important items where others tried to stretch the limits of being able to follow through with what they wrote. Most wanted to block off time for dinner with the family or attend practice with their children. Others placed phone limits during the first hour home or would not action items until after their children went to bed. The document had three signature blocks: the Soldier, the spouse, and the commander.

After our discussion, I called the respective spouses to affirm my commitment to support their contract. If anything in the contract was going to be broken due to mission requirements or by my decision I would call the spouse to let them know. I also asked the leader to remind me if I was tasking them with something that would interfere with a contract item. This allowed me to assume risk or push the requirement to another time in support of the family. Rarely is an item so important that I needed to break the trust established by the contract.

Talent management starts with taking care of the Soldier and the family. The family contract is an easy tool to help support balance in the profession, develop healthy family relationships, and strengthen trust between the family and the Army. Understanding what is important to your Soldiers and their family is the first step in actualizing People First. If you do it right your organization will thrive, as will the families that support it.

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