



by Kevin Shinnick

Developing the ability to influence not only subordinates or superiors, but also peers, is a vital skill for leaders. It may even be one of the most important skills we practice as we move up in rank and experience. Unfortunately, there is no formal curriculum in the Army on the art of peer leadership. [ADP 6-22](#), the Army's doctrinal reference on leadership, makes scant mention of it and instead primarily focuses on leadership via command responsibility, where one leads through directive methods by virtue of rank or assignment. Peer leadership is the process of leading horizontally through non-authoritative, [influential methods](#), to earn the [trust](#) and commitment of those around you.

The importance of peer leadership is evident early in both officer and enlisted careers. Initial entry training, whether it be cadet basic training or basic combat training, thrust junior leaders into problem-solving environments where time is short, information is limited, resources are scarce, leadership rotates on the minute, and most importantly, trust in one

another has yet to be established. These conditions are not exclusive to basic training environments and are continuously witnessed throughout one's entire military career. Being a cadet, executive officer, staff officer, attending professional military education, working with multinational partners, and various other assessments and selections all revolve around peer leadership.

My journey from non-commissioned to commissioned officer has brought me through Basic Combat Training, RASP, Ranger School, Cadet Candidate Basic Training, Cadet Basic Training, and the Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course with a few deployments sprinkled in-between. As I reflect on my time in these environments, three qualities stand out as having contributed to my own and others' successful peer leadership capabilities: competence, leading by example, and humility. The overtly social aspect of peer environments demands that no one quality exists absent the others and rarely does a leader arrive already possessing all three.

## **Competence**

Competence is the first step in building rapport and establishing trust amongst peers. Whether it be skill level one tasks, the operations process, physical fitness, or planning products, leadership environments in and out of the garrison rely on diverse sets of skills that typically no one individual can completely possess.

First impressions matter. Arriving in your new environment capable of skillfully demonstrating a relevant task will set you apart from your peers and mark you as reliable. In other words, make an opening statement to all that you are capable and ready to work. However, displaying competence in and of itself is not always sufficient as people have different priorities and interpretations of what matters. Peer leaders must understand their audience and demonstrate competency in ways that will best resonate with particular groups.

When I arrived at the United States Military Academy Preparatory School (USMAPS) as a twenty four year old E-5, I had to reckon with the fact that I was now in an environment of predominantly younger individuals whose varying levels of commitment to the military lifestyle would likely conflict with my four years of active-duty experiences. Reading the audience would prove particularly important. I was chosen as the Battalion Sergeant Major, charged with introducing my peers to the standards and discipline within the Army system. It would be folly to think that simply echoing the typical buzzwords while wearing higher cadet rank would resonate. To truly lead, I would have to meet them in the middle and earn their respect. How could I reach this audience of athletes and scholars?

In this environment of hyper-driven, type-A personalities, physical fitness would be one of my answers. I wagered that if athletes (who made up the majority of USMAPS) saw me lifting in the weight room or running sprints on the track, they would respect that I was serious, could live up to the priorities I was espousing, and see there was more to me than just monotonous standards and discipline. Later at West Point, I served as the Brigade Command Sergeant Major, now responsible for the discipline of the entire West Point Corps of Cadets while also unifying the Brigade staff under a shared vision. Here, amongst some of the top performers in the Corps, I would best earn their trust and cooperation through producing quality products and pitching creative solutions to serve their concerns. Having already established myself as a military professional, I had to rise to the challenge of a different audience with different interests.

These actions were by no means the total solution, but they provided the initial foot in the door that enabled more direct leadership methods. A high five in the gym makes the next peer-to-peer correction that much more impactful due to the newfound empathy between both parties and an understanding that it's less about power and more about looking out for each other. Being able to demonstrate a genuine interest in helping someone solve their problems establishes a sense of trust that, when it's time for them to execute an unpopular decision on your behalf, allows them to still be confident that you have their best interests in mind. Competence is a quick way of earning the trust of your peers, but once trust is earned it must also be maintained.

### **Lead by Example**

No action is inconsequential. Everything you do (or fail to do) leaves an impression on those around you, for better or worse. Your actions in and out of leadership positions will determine whether you maintain or lose their hard-earned trust. The old adage "do the right thing, even when no one is looking" rings especially true in peer leadership environments as everyone is always looking.

[Shared hardships build the strongest bonds](#) in *any* leadership environment because they demonstrate that a leader does not think they're above the requirements they place on subordinates. In peer environments, it reinforces the trust that you can be counted on when it matters most, whether as a leader or follower. Trust lost by failing to lead by example is particularly difficult to gain back.

My Cadet Company Commander during Cadet Field Training (CFT) experienced this loss of trust early in the detail. The first day of land navigation saw torrential downpour as leaders worked to execute training and feed their trainees. With no overhead cover, trainees and

leaders stood in line waiting for dinner, holding styrofoam plates that were barely intact by the time everyone cycled through the line. While we waited in the rain, the commander remained in her HUMVEE by the chow line alone, opting to communicate solely through radio while pretending not to notice the trainees shuffling by. When the cadre approached the vehicle for guidance, they were greeted by a window unzipped just enough to hear a muffled response. The commander finally emerged in her awkwardly dry uniform once the storm subsided and tried to make small talk with the trainees. Most were rightfully a little short in their responses.

By the time the storm subsided, so too had everyone's trust and confidence in this leader. From that moment on everyone was more critical of the commander's actions. When the behavior was repeated on the FTX, it came as no surprise.

The point of this anecdote is not to argue that leaders should pointlessly stand in the rain just to be seen doing so. It is that leading by example is either achieved or not based on simple, often binary, choices. Do I share this hardship or not? Do I set the right example or not? The commander could have easily chosen to converse with their trainees during the storm instead of after knowing they can move in and out of the training area (and to dry clothes) with ease or rationalize that the vehicle heater and inevitable summer heat will dry them at rate that'd make it worthwhile to share a hardship with their subordinates. Competency and leading by example are effective ways of communicating, but in peer leadership environments, it is less about *what* you communicate and more about *how* you communicate.

## **Humility**

Humility builds trust by fostering genuine communication with one's peers. It enables leaders to both develop and [be developed](#) by their peers whose strengths will likely complement their weaknesses. When leaders ask for help or admit they're wrong, they show a sense of vulnerability that tells their team they trust them and recognize their talents through their ability to help. Competent leaders who display humility will find their teammates gravitating to them when they need assistance and more frequently offering their own. This dynamic creates a positive feedback loop and secures an organizational [growth mindset](#). When you consult peers for help or vice versa, the interaction becomes a teaching opportunity that not only builds trust and spreads knowledge across the team, but sets an example that will encourage others to also share knowledge and seek collaboration, the effects of which diffuse through the team for compounding results. There are few better examples of this dynamic than Ranger School.

Ranger students come from all backgrounds and in all shapes, sizes, and ranks, all with unique strengths and weaknesses. The diversity of Ranger students is well suited for the diverse array of [challenges](#) the school presents, although not everyone, including myself, is quick to realize that. The success of Ranger squads is determined by how well their strengths and weaknesses interact with each other. Key to this synergy is awareness of one's own weaknesses, others' strengths, and the humility to ask for help.

I arrived at Ranger School fresh out of an intense pre-Ranger program and multiple deployments. I thought I knew everything, especially compared to the IBOLC officer cohort that made up the majority of my squad. Rangers or "Batt boys" like me had always heard that officers would be cocky, entitled, only-good-for-planners who would need an eye kept on them during patrols. The officers had likewise heard that Batt boys were cocky, stubborn meatheads only worth it on actions-on. The learning phase of Ranger School exacerbated these stereotypes as *everyone* struggled in their own ways. Mistakes rather than successes informed people's opinions of each other and all were too proud to ask for help or lend it.

Communication broke down as the squad formed grudges and cliques, "no-go's" multiplied, and the process repeated. Finally, the stress, exhaustion, and hunger prompted a sudden and vulnerable, "ok, why don't we get along?" conversation between me and one of the officers while I was roaming the patrol base and keeping people awake. He was wondering the same thing, yet egos meant nobody wanted to meet halfway. Through discussion, we learned my intensity was confused for abrasiveness while I confused their calculation for hesitation. The ideal solution was somewhere in the middle. They thought my shyness in asking for help was stubbornness while I thought them not reaching out to me was elitism. Our lack of humility led us to overestimate our own abilities and prevented us from looking beyond the assumptions we had arrived with.

We realized we should've been relying on each other instead of relying on ourselves. We bonded over our former pettiness and resolved that it was time to make the stereotypes work for us. They knew how to plan and I knew how to execute. Between all of us there was nothing we couldn't do and we were determined to prove that. And that's exactly what we did. Come graduation, our squad had the highest pass rate in the company (9 of the original 13 going straight through) and I went from being at risk of being peered the lowest in Darby to being peered the highest and earning Enlisted Honor Graduate.

### **Three Keys to Mastery**

Mastery in the Profession of Arms isn't achieved through being an expert in everything involved in the mission. The sheer number of complex tasks the profession demands makes

that impossible. Mastery is knowing how to best enable and incorporate the diverse talents that your team has to offer. Peer leadership is crucial to unlocking your team's potential and it all boils down to trust. Competency shows your team that they can rely on you to both lead and be led. Leading by example demonstrates that you're not in it for yourself and have the team's best interest in mind. Humility is the key to unlocking a reciprocal development that proliferates knowledge throughout the team for the betterment of everyone. These three traits are most displayed by the leader and observed by peers when they are *not* in a leadership position. When the time comes to lead, you'll have earned their trust and commitment.

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