



by Matthew Smith and Thomas Hale

There is a lot to ponder as the summer begins, many Field Grades are in the twilight of their command preparation. Consequently, there is a lot to ponder prior to taking the guidon as a battalion commander. Through its pre-command course(s), the Army does well to prepare an officer mentally and emotionally for command. For me, though, and I assume that I'm not alone, I completed all the PCC requirements and still felt uneasy about how to conduct a meaningful command in-brief. My past experiences and PCC had certainly equipped me to understand "why" a command in-brief is essential and "what" should be shared, but I struggled with the "how." Specifically: How do I make the brief meaningful and authentic to the team I was about to join?

There is no one way to do a command in-brief. Lots of command teams use the post-theater and execute a single brief. Of course, the hybrid version of that style is to brief *en masse* but then dismiss sections/demographics sequentially. Another way is to simply send out a letter to your formation that addresses your priorities and values. A third way is to conduct

multiple small group in-briefs. My Command Sergeant Major and I chose this third way to conduct our in-brief.

Since CSM Hale and I assumed our command positions together, we invested a lot of energy into shaping how we would initially engage with our new team. As we designed our command in-brief, we considered the following ideas: *focus on our core ethos; selecting the setting; structure of the brief; gather immediate feedback; choosing a medium; invite key leaders; and ensure that the brief is recyclable.*

**Craft a core message.** When CSM Tom Hale and I spoke for the first time, it was about 6 months before command. First, we talked about our background and families. Then we spent a lot of time talking about values, traits, and ethos that we believe every Soldier should cultivate. Finally, over the months preceding command, we honed in on the core set of traits framework that would shape the Apocalypse Battalion's ethics: *servant leadership, grit, and inclusiveness.*

**Select the setting.** CSM Hale and I made two significant decisions regarding the setting of our command in-brief. First, we were sensitive that the unit had just redeployed two months prior to our arrival. We were, in effect, the "new kids" moving into an established neighborhood. Thus, we designed the in-briefs to occur at platoon and company areas. We wanted part of our initial meeting with the formation to be a physical demonstration that we would meet them where they are. Second, the groups' division allowed us to adapt our core ethos message to a particular cohort, thus making it more meaningful. In the end, we designed an in-brief schedule that included 9 in-briefs over 4 days across various locations in the Battalion footprint (as a natural introvert, this schedule taxed me, but I cannot emphasize enough that the yield was well worth the labor).

**Structure the presentation.** We divided our in-brief into four parts: Soldier introductions, command team introduction, discussion on the Battalion's core ethos, and closing comments. Because we designed the in-briefs around a small group setting, it afforded the CSM and me the opportunity to have Soldiers introduce themselves and share a little about themselves. This is a bit cheesy and I'm certain Soldiers felt uncomfortable introducing themselves to the group. That said, the introductions served two purposes: (1) it allowed for the CSM and I to personally and directly engage with each and every Soldier in the Battalion during our in-brief week; and (2) it broke the ice and lowered any inhibitions for the Soldiers to openly talk later in the in-brief.

Following the Soldier introductions, we had the SMs pick three things they wanted to know about the CSM and myself. The CSM and I presented them a board list of topics on a white

board, and we empowered them to choose. In doing so, this kept the command team bio part of the intro concise and focused on things that interested the group.

With intros complete, we shifted our focus to our leadership philosophy. The philosophy is divided into four sections: Battalion Ethos, Things to Balance in Life, Duty, and the Battalion’s enduring purpose (see Table 1). Finally, we came full circle and ended with closing comments and questions from the group.

<b>Our Enduring Purpose</b>	Enable the Ground Force to Win
<b>Duty</b>	“Do your job”
<b>Balancing Life</b>	Faith, Family, Finances
<b>Core Ethos</b>	Servant-leadership, Grit, Inclusiveness

**Table 1**

**Choose a medium.** The easiest and most used medium for transmitting command in-briefs is, of course, PowerPoint. We decided to avoid PowerPoint. For each of the briefs we used white boards and dry erase markers. We did not want to *present* our command in-brief so much as we wanted to *share* it. I borrowed this concept from Dan Roam’s [book](#), *The Back of the Napkin*.

In the book, Roam posits that “drawing” out concepts creates a venue that invites “comments and inspire[s] discussion.” He further writes, “audiences respond better to hand-drawn images...makes [concepts] less intimidating and more inviting.” Thus, by drawing out our ethos on a board vice presenting it on a slide, we effectively invited our Soldiers into the creative process and perhaps, on some level, cultivated buy-in from them.

**Gather immediate feedback.** For each in-brief, we handed out 3×5 note cards to the Soldiers. On one side, we asked them to list sustains about their company and/or battalion. On the other, we asked them to identify areas where we could improve the quality of the work areas or life. If the Soldier was new and had no ideas on what to sustain or improve, we asked that they simply put what they hoped to achieve while assigned to the Apocalypse Battalion.

**Invite some friends.** For each in-brief, we had the Battalion EO, SHARP, and Chaplain to attend. Those are critical leaders in our formation. Although they did not have significant speaking roles in our in-brief, their presence and introduction at these briefs were significant.

**Rinse, wash, repeat.** Since doing our intro command brief back in January of 2020, we'd re-packaged this presentation as our monthly newcomer's brief. As any DEOCs survey will reveal to a command team, shaping and informing the narrative of your Battalion is not easy. Therefore, we leverage our monthly newcomers brief to re-insert our core ethos through using our command brief and the above structure. We've since centralized the brief to one or two locations in the Battalion footprint, but all other aspects noted above have remained consistent.

In closing, I hope this helps those struggling with the "how" to conduct a command in-brief. Again, there are multiple ways to do it, and no one way is necessarily better than the other. Be authentic in your message and show dignity and respect to your team, and there is a good chance that you'll have a positive and enduring initial engagement with your formation.

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