



by Brennan Randel

Taking command of a company can oftentimes feel bittersweet. There is so much to be excited about, yet equally so much to be apprehensive about. Beyond the immense responsibility that elicits this range of emotions, there is the fundamental anxiety of company command: future success and career advancement is highly dependent on an officer's success as a commander.

A bad command evaluation often results in an officer being passed up for promotion to major on the first look, and possibly forever.

So imagine the consternation I should have felt when I took command in the same battalion as a rockstar peer—an individual who was now my competition for the all-important “most qualified” command evaluation.

However, I didn’t feel any consternation. Truthfully, I felt relieved because I knew I would be working alongside a first-rate officer. And he wasn’t just an excellent officer, but someone who had become an awesome friend in the eight months I had known him. In fact, he was my best friend in Korea and still one of my closest friends today.

Peer relationships in the Army—in any profession, really—are tricky. There are a limited number of positions available for promotion, and peers compete with each other for those scarce slots. But it doesn’t have to be competitive. In all actuality, it can be quite rewarding.

Command is a lonely endeavor, and a close peer network was the best, and sometimes only, outlet for stress. My peer commanders were not just sympathetic—they were dealing with many of the same frustrations—they were also the best source of advice.

It wasn’t always possible to set aside the natural inclination to build a silo of excellence around my company. I wanted my company to succeed, and I also wanted to stand out as a stellar performer. It sometimes felt like the game was zero-sum: either they’re doing well, or I am, but it can’t be both.

This isn’t true, though. As a rising tide lifts all boats, the success of those to your left and right also lifts you and your organization.

My friend ended up doing pretty well. For his first evaluation, our senior rater evaluated him as the “#1 captain of all captains in the brigade” from our senior rater. His second evaluation was just as good: “Remains the #1 captain of all captains in the brigade.”

Talk about an ego check.

I was one of those captains he was so clearly better than. But I was happy for him to be recognized for his performance and potential, and I would have cosigned his evaluation if it were possible!

Our friendship made me a better person and commander, so what use would it have been if I only saw him as competition? And further, any coldness in our relationship wouldn't have impacted his being the number one and me being the number whatever. It was only for my benefit to have a thriving relationship with my friend and "competition."

As significant as peer relationships are, though, other professional relationships also deserve attention.

One of [the best career-related podcast episodes](#) I've heard is from the now-defunct Fortune Unfiltered podcast. The episode features an interview with [Carla Harris](#), a senior client advisor and vice-chairman of wealth management at Morgan Stanley.

The entire episode is worth your time, but it was her discussion about relationships that stuck with me years later.

Harris discussed an epiphany she had when she was a finance associate on Wall Street. She was sitting inside an evaluation meeting of analysts junior to her. Behind closed doors, the associates discussed the analysts and tried to figure out which analysts would progress within the firm.

This evaluative process was the "a-ha" moment for Harris.

"All of the big decisions about your career are made when you are not in the room. So how do you want people to talk about you when you're not in the room? And who do you want to speak?"

The concept that others decide if you will get that new job or promotion is intuitive, of course. But visualizing several people sitting around a conference table and talking about you makes it more real somehow.

Her moment of clarity served as a moment of clarity for me as well. It reinforced the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships, especially with those who might be in the room speaking on my behalf.

So who could be in the room? Some might think this is the role of the mentor. While we tend to lump anyone who provides advice or advocacy into the “mentor” bucket, Harris breaks down the broad concept of mentorship into three distinct categories.

First, there are advisors. Advisors are anyone within your professional environment who can answer discreet questions. “Can you walk me through the weighted cost of capital? We did it differently at my last firm.”

A good advisor is anyone in your environment who has the intellect and experience to answer your questions. They do not need to have any status or sway within the firm. They just need to be able to provide you with answers.

Next, there are actual mentors. As Harris tells it, these are the people to whom you can tell the good, the bad, and the ugly. You share with them your intimate fears, concerns, mistakes, triumphs, and strategies.

Harris says you must trust them, and they must know you well. Further, mentors do not need to be in your organization or look like you but must understand the context of your career. They must understand your context to give you tailored advice that you can successfully execute. A mentor to two individuals pursuing the same career goal should provide each different guidance because they have different contexts to their careers.

The final and most important relationship is the sponsor. The sponsor is the person in the room when the decisions about your career are being made. While a mentor doesn't need to be in your organization, a sponsor must be. They are the person carrying your paper into the room, advocating for you behind the closed door. Essentially, they are going to spend their political and social capital on you.

An effective sponsor must have a seat at the decision-making table and must have the "juice" to get you through to the finish line.

If you can only foster one type of relationship, the sponsor should receive your attention. "You can survive a long time without a mentor. But you will not ascend without a sponsor," said Harris.

Throughout my career, I have been surrounded by wonderful peers, advisors, and mentors. They have provided shoulders to cry on, expert recommendations for navigating new work environments, and invaluable advice on career moves.

But most of all, sponsors have helped me reach the next step of my career at almost every transition point. Even though I don't feel like I deserve their support, I am forever grateful for it.

And while Harris is correct that sponsors are the most important relationship to foster, there is one important consideration I have found true: Every sponsor has started as either a peer, an advisor, or a mentor.

*Brennan Randel is an active-duty aviation officer and Leadership Fellow for the [Army's Center for Junior Officers](#). He is currently pursuing a master's in legislative affairs at George Washington University, and you can follow him on Twitter [@BrennanRandel](#).*

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