



by Mike S. Burke

It's that time of year. If you are reading this, you are about to begin a year-long journey as a member of the newest class of prospective sergeants majors at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA).

Before we dive into how to use this time wisely, let me provide a statement that is one of the most important realizations I've had as a Senior NCO.

"You will be rated, judged and build credibility by your ability to take your Commander's intent/philosophy, operationalize and systemize it. The ability to get results that build on what your command envisions. More importantly, as a CSM, you need to provide quick and easy to implement advice to 1SGs and CSMs."

To do this you need to perfect the art of reflection on the present and past lessons learned.

As such, there are a number of things I wish someone had told me prior to attending USASMA and we need to be prescriptive about this. This is a year of reflection and learning where you will be in charge of no one but yourself. However, upon completion, you will be filling an extremely important role. You owe it to yourself and your future Soldiers to maximize this opportunity and prepare yourself for the challenges ahead.

First, ask yourself, what kind of sergeant major do you want to be?

- What are your strengths? How can you convert them into potential focus areas?
- What are your weaknesses? How could they be potential blind spots?

At this point in your career, you should know what you are strong at and it is completely acceptable to play into those strengths. In fact, when you first become a Command Sergeant Major or Sergeant Major, you need to be able to rapidly produce results. Failing to do so will reduce credibility and influence. We have all worked with or worked for lame duck senior NCOs. No one can ever quite tell you what role they serve in the organization. Go in with the assumption that you will be viewed this way until you reverse the paradigm.

Building on what you learn at USASMA, and in preparation of receiving the colors, pick three focus areas to devote time and energy to. In addition to playing off of your strengths, I recommend you use the following three questions to help narrow your focus:

1. What are your commanders' priorities and vision for the organization? Ensure that your focus areas are supportive and building upon their vision. You are not the commander, do not try to be. Publishing your focus areas will confuse and misrepresent. Instead, dialogue with your commander on these focus areas and how they can align with their priorities and vision.
2. What does your organization need from its senior enlisted advisor? Meet the individuals in your organization at that need and work on it together, through mutual trust and respect.
3. Can I focus on something that is multifaceted (short-, medium-, and long-term wins for the organization)? If you focus on something that is multifaceted, it will require a long-term investment and, over time, will have numerous branches. For example, as a first sergeant and in my last three CSM positions, I have focused on Leader Professional Development.

As leaders, we need to fight for perspective. A major part of this involves knowing our blind spots and biases. If you have weaknesses, who can you reach out to in order to make up for it? Coming into a Stryker Squadron I knew mine was maintenance, therefore I deliberately nurtured professional relationships with the maintenance chief, PL, and PSG. I spent time in the motor pool and in maintenance meetings asking questions. An added benefit was the connections I cultivated; people love to talk about their jobs. Humbly asking, "what does X mean, I want to know so I can help make your job easier and the unit better," usually elicited positive responses and cultivated positive relationships.

Lastly, at every echelon I have sat down with the senior NCOs in my organizations and asked them to tell me what I am missing, what they need from me, and what I can do better.

After posing these questions to them, I silence myself and take notes. The more they talk, the stronger the relationship. When people are not afraid to ask for help and tell you when you are wrong or misunderstanding something, you've arrived. If they say everything is great and nothing can be improved, well, you have a lot of work to do. You still need to build mutual trust and respect. Try to remember you are *their* command sergeant major, not *the* commander sergeant major.

The next eighteen to twenty-four months will go by in the blink of an eye. At the end of that time, you will instinctively know you accomplished much, but will you be able to quantify it? If there is no structure or strategy, the answer will be a resounding no. You do not just want to know this for your own self benefit. You need to know it so you can reflect on it, write about it, and then prepare for the next position.

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