

SURVIVAL GUIDE

by Ashley Welte

Author's Note: The vignettes provided in this article are from Majors and Lieutenant Colonels who served in three different Corps, four separate Divisions, and seven individual Brigades / Groups. They have a total of 22 years in Major key development positions between them, and they are all independently successful in their respective branches.

Succeeding as a field grade is not just about surpassing expectations set before you. It is about who you are as a leader and how you take care of those you lead. You may think you have established your beliefs and foundational principles of leadership as a senior captain, but those fundamental theories are about to be challenged to their core. You will witness conversations that are biased and subjective. You will experience firsthand senior leader (GO) mentorship in action, and you will get to decide if it is worth emulating. Being a major is about becoming an organizational influencer - accomplishing the missions, improvements, changes, and rebuilds with, and through subordinates, peers, and leaders. However, it is also about not failing yourself, your family, your friends, or your unit's lineage. As a major, there is more at stake than before, but there are also more opportunities for your influence to grow beyond your personal expectations. You will never hear it is easy. There are hard times, trying days, and devastating moments where you will ask yourself, "is it worth it?" It is. The goal of this article is to give you the opportunity to succeed where many have struggled and to provide you unfettered dialogue accompanied by vignettes of real

situations to better prepare you for the future. A leadership transition exists; you must establish your own focus; ownership of missteps is critical; the pack comes before everything; you must retain the moral high ground; your attitude matters; it is okay to let others lead; and leadership is nothing without compassion.

The Transition

Eventually you will feel the pressure and realize you are on unsteady ground. This is when requirements can become overwhelming, if you let them, or you can choose to take ownership of necessary decisions. These moments are when a field grade begins to feel the real transition from company to field grade leader, and direct to organizational leadership ([ADP 6-22](#)). The most aggressive demand on your time as a field grade will be determining if requirements are categorized as a glass or a rubber ball. Glass balls are action items that will require attention and cannot be put aside - they must be actioned or they will break, which ultimately translates into a significant impact on your unit. Rubber balls on the other hand can be dropped and set to the side without having a significant impact on you or your unit, because as you would assume, rubber balls bounce. This is where you must begin to sort, filter, and organize requirements into three areas:

- Mission Critical (glass balls) things that must get done in order to accomplish the unit's mission
- Trooper Critical (glass balls) things that must be completed to ensure your fighting force is prepared and ready to conduct their mission
- The other priorities (rubber balls) things that will not impact your unit's mission or your Troopers, these things can be deferred or put into "tomorrow's" pile

Your boss cares about all the requirements, but they do not care about the details relating to how you accomplished them or established the prioritization. What matters to your boss

is that the tasks are completed in a manner that supports the commander's guidance and intent. If you cannot sort through the requirements and filter them as necessary then your boss gets to once again put on their major hat and do it for you - a situation you want to avoid. Field grades understand guidance and are comfortable with ambiguity because you should not require detailed direction to accomplish the mission. We are the facilitators, organizers, and architects of the plan. Field grades ingest vague guidance and produce detailed direction to the force. You need to get comfortable translating broad concepts into comprehensive actions or plans for action. It is your job and your comfort level will influence your success as a major.

After my time at Fort Leavenworth and ILE, I was assigned to a Division Headquarters as a G5 planner. Within two weeks of signing in, I was sent forward on deployment as an early embed for the US Forces Afghanistan mission. Not only did I not know many people on the division staff, but I was also required to provide them information and start building relationships with the unit they were replacing. Due to the time zone difference and the distance, communication was not always easy. I had to get comfortable operating on my own and within the intent of my Division commander to set the conditions for success. Although I had only been in the unit less than a month, I was expected to operate under general guidance to ensure that the team was positioned to take over the mission with limited friction. This was my first real experience of being a major and the expectation the rank entails. You are required to be the initial problem solver that is able to move within organizations. I then transitioned to be the Operations Officer of a Combined Arms Battalion that was on rotation as part of Operation Spartan Shield. I could have waited for them to redeploy before joining the team but I thought it would be easier to integrate into the team if I had some shared rotation experience. The biggest hurdle I had was that integration. This team had just shared the hardships of a rotation for the last eight

months. I had to quickly learn the team and then be the continuity as the team moved on after we returned. Once back at home station, we immediately transitioned into another training cycle with little time to reset. The biggest change between being a planner and being a Battalions Operations Officer was that now you were leading an entire staff section and indirectly an entire battalion. As a planner, you just had yourself and the OPTs that you were running but now you needed to mentor other leaders who were looking at you to be an expert in your craft.

LTC, Armor, former Division Planner, BN S3, BDE S3

Your Focus

First, field grading is hard. It is the jobs, the hours, the level of trust and confidence, and the essential, but time-consuming mentorship you owe company grade officers, warrant officers, and non-commissioned officers. It is speaking up when necessary, and sometimes keeping your thoughts to yourself, and it's always knowing you could do better, but at what sacrifice. A very smart senior spouse once shared with me that these would be the hardest years of your Army career - for everyone (family included), and she was right. However, it was not the job, the tasks, or the requirements. The hardest part about being a Field Grade is overcoming your own desire to get it all done. There will always be something left incomplete, an email that went unanswered, a presentation you never double-checked, a bedtime story never read, and someone you never took the chance to mentor. This is the hardest part, and you will have to develop a way to overcome the pressure of knowing you could do better if there was more time.

To be clear, the areas where you can focus are not mutually exclusive nor are they always mutually supportive. Our first focus is naturally up – you were not promoted to the rank of major by not accomplishing your mission. You accomplished most, if not all, tasks given to you with minimal loss or damage to Personnel and Equipment, and you did it well. The difference now is you are the one providing the tasks, tracking their accomplishment, and ensuring the commander or senior leader has what they need to accomplish their mission. You must learn to do all of this without breaking the things that support you.



You also have to decide where you will focus. Are you going to be a field grade that focuses up and accomplishes every task your boss gives you no matter the consequences on your staff, family, unit, or reputation? Or will you be a field grade that focuses down and follows the one golden rule of leadership – take care of your Troopers and they will take care of you? It is not an either-or decision. It's a daily choice to balance push (your effort to push the unit and its leaders where they need to go) versus pull (the demands on you: physical, emotional, and mental), and having the emotional intelligence to know when it is time to lead up, mentor down, or attack the 50m target.

We had done it! We graduated CGSC nearly unscathed. We were on our way to our follow-on assignments with a real vacation to a major theme park enroute. It would be the second destination vacation our family had ever taken. However, with joy on the immediate horizon, a season of anxiety loomed ahead with the thoughts of an impending deployment for my husband. He was hand selected for a new project but because of timing, he would deploy to fill a gap instead. We knew when he would leave, but we did not know when he would return. We were given anywhere from 3-6 months but we both knew it was more likely to be longer. In the meantime, I would be a single parent of two, continuing my master's degree, and starting my own Key Development (KD) assignment as a Brigade S6. I was fortunate to get a KD assignment coming straight out of ILE and I was thankful for the opportunity. The team I was joining was mostly in transition with new people in and old people out. The unit also had a major exercise scheduled to begin almost immediately. Essentially, I would be starting a new KD assignment and participating in an exercise a day or two after my husband deployed. How would we manage this challenge in a new place where we knew very few folks? The answer: we are a blessed dual military family with a bench of family and friends who would drop almost anything to come to the rescue. In this particular instance, I called in Dad (a.k.a PAPA). He is retired military and knows the ropes when it comes to those weird hours and the emotional rollercoaster we would experience in the first few weeks of our new assignment. Throughout our careers, we have navigated similar circumstances and have learned one key fact: it is okay to ask for help! Our support system would be there to help lift us up so that each of us could be successful without the stress of wondering how we would ever accomplish the Army's mission.

LTC, Signal Corps, former BDE S6

True Ownership

All majors have been there. They've taken out their CACs and started to pack up for the night, just to remember there is one mission critical task, conversation, or email that was not done. These moments will define you as a field grade. Do you tell your team to stop packing to complete the task? Do you allow your team to leave happily while you stay all night to complete the task alone? Or do you own your misstep? The advised COA is to acknowledge your blunder and make a call. But before you make the call - you *must* have a recommendation on the way forward. You *cannot* cold call your boss and expect them to solve your problems. Develop a COA that supports all involved. If it is to work late and complete the task tonight, then recommend the team take a break and allow them to eat dinner with their families, *but* before you bring anyone back to work ensure you have a task and purpose for every person you require to return. When they do return, do not waste their time. Be deliberate and focused. Succinctly energize your staff in the directions that will enable mission accomplishment in the most efficient manner. You are their leader; they rely on you to get them through the worst of it. So lead them.

Working on a Division staff there are sometimes way too many "chiefs and not enough Indians" to do the work and research to get the mission done (or whatever else you need to get done). Quite frequently, I am going about my day with normal tasks to accomplish (because everyone has a boss). Most days are bogged down with meetings that I need to attend and many emails that I have not had a chance to respond to and then BOOM, another random RFI from upstairs (where everyone outranks you) asking about information that requires quite a bit of analysis to answer. This time they want analysis on housing/barracks information in order to support a

unit redeploying. The unit redeploying needs this information to plan and ensure they have enough space for all the Soldiers to live upon redeployment. This information can't simply be gathered by running a query or looking in one of our many systems to get the answer. This answer will not take just a few hours to do but quite a few days. It is easy to say that we need more time to give the correct answer but that is not something a GO wants to hear. How do you respond? It is your responsibility to get the answers. In order to provide guidance, you must also get more information and answer, "why this RFI is so relevant," so that when you task your subordinates to track down the information they know why it is so important. When your subordinates understand the relevance or "the why" it is easier to empower them to get the right information and do the proper analysis for you. Because remember, even down to the lowest level they are still part of the team and you need everyone to work together to continue to be successful and answer the RFI.

MAJ, Adjutant General, Former BDE S1, Deputy G1

Belong to the Pack

It would be fantastic to tell you that all field grades are super awesome and everyone wants everyone to succeed, but that would be closer to fantasy than reality. You are in a pack of wolves - one of the most exceedingly complex social units in which you will ever find yourself. You must understand not all field grades are alike. Some require you (as a peer) to lead them; others are young and require peer mentorship to educate them on the ways of the pack, the unit, and potentially the Army. A few are exceedingly aggressive, seeking to assert themselves and challenge the status quo, while some actually do want what's best for the unit and their peers - these are the ones you befriend. They are the field grades who will

bring their peers along, who will speak when necessary, and who know in the end that teamwork is what matters most at all levels. As a field grade, you MUST understand your role in the pack. You do not have to be the smartest, strongest, or most strategic thinker – but you must be humble, bold, and forgiving. You must inspire trust through honesty and authenticity. To be a leader is one thing, but to become a peer leader defines success as a field grade officer.

When I rejoined the Legion as the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) S-2, I found myself among 53 other majors with the same senior rater, most of whom were Green Berets selected to return to Group following ILE. My wingman was a fellow MI major who joined the unit a few months after me. It was at this point in my career that I decided we, my fellow MI wingman and I, had a choice. We could compete against one another, likely fail, and provide a rather bad image of the MI branch to the SF community. On the other hand, we could work together toward a common purpose, having faith in our commander as our senior rater to be fair and equitable when it came to block checks. We chose the latter. Upon his arrival, we had a closed-door, honest conversation about our prior experiences, strengths and weaknesses, and our mutual expectations. Despite our differences, we shook hands and made it a point to over communicate and trust that we had each other's back. If we ever disagreed or had even the slightest question, we spoke directly and honestly with one another, clearing the air immediately. We made it work. As a result, the unit succeeded, and we succeeded, as a team and as individuals. As you progress, you must become diligent, discerning, and discrete with your words. Everyone is watching you and listening to what you say and how you say it; including the wolves in your midst—peers, subordinates, and superiors alike. As the proverb says: “who chatters to you will likely chatter of you.” Gossip poisons unit cohesion. Next, as a field grade, you will find yourself in the company of seniors (whether as a planner, briefer, or

straphanger) who speak candidly with one another. Do not abuse this trust. Also, mind your tongue when speaking with your people, as a stray, thoughtless comment or question may inadvertently lead to wasted work. Last, you want folks to associate you with good things, not as a purveyor of disruptive drama.

LTC, MI, former Intel Planner, BN XO, and SFG S2

Retain the High Ground

Keeping your unit and commander on the moral high ground is an implied task. The slippery slope in front of an organization is not always easily recognizable. The human terrain you are navigating will change over time, and you need to be ready and postured to respond when necessary or brace for impact. A field grade must be able to step outside the everyday complexity of operations and make sure the unit is doing the right things. You must be able to identify small incremental changes, because over time, they are powerful and it is your job to ensure the power is positive. Was it an honest mistake - or a conscious choice? Ask yourself, subordinates, and leaders these questions, because if you cede ground in this area, it is almost impossible to gain it back.

It is in the course of these moments you earn your oak leaf, the ones that start with a phone call and end with an office call, sometimes with lawyers present. There is no guaranteed or fail-safe plan you can put into place to prevent the call. However, it is what you do after the call that will influence the unit beyond your tenure. A field grade must understand and acknowledge that not all situations are preventable and some are not even fathomable. It takes a secure person to realize they are wrong; it takes a courageous person to recognize faults in their organization's culture, but it takes a leader to acknowledge the faults and discuss them openly with your boss or your boss' boss. It is your job to deliver the bad news,

which sometimes includes closing the door and having tactful but honest discussion about morals, ethics, and acceptable human behavior. Your role is not only the gatekeeper to the senior leader in the organization, but also the guardian of that leader's subordinates and it is your responsibility to protect them. You will not always get it right, and the first conversation will be terrifying - there are reasons they refer to you as "Iron Majors."

As a senior major, I had the opportunity to participate in field grade slating, a process used to align majors to key developmental positions. During the process, I noticed all the majors earmarked for the most sought after positions were in fact white males. This was alarming. I had to bring it up to my boss. Did he know? How was I supposed to change his mind about the slating? I mean, it looked really bad. I used ORBs on a white board to illustrate the perception issue and brought him to my office to have the discussion, along with our female CSM. "Sir, they're all white males," I told him. He looked at me a bit surprised and confused. Then he looked at the board for a while and reconfirmed his selections. Stating, while we were recruiting a female officer, "she's not ready for hard KD, she arrives too late and I've talked with her, she's not ready." While the conversation continued, we attempted some moves and looked at them on the board, but the board always returned to the original slate. My boss was not sexist or racist - but he was honest with himself. He realized there was a problem, and while it was too late to alter the current slate based on inbound officers, he had the opportunity to adjust our future selections in the AIM Marketplace. Attempting to bring to light sensitive issues is not always easy, or comfortable, but if done in a tactful and professional manner it can make a difference.

MAJ, Military Intelligence, former Division Planner, BN S3, BCT S2, Deputy G2

Attitude is Everything

You have heard it before, but it is true. As a field grade, there are multiple opportunities for you to join the bandwagon and hitch a ride on the negative train, but you can't. You can't be a fan, you can't buy a ticket, and you can't even admire the grandeur of the train. Part of the transition to field grade is becoming a sound advisor to all (yes that says all). Company grade leaders, peers, and sometimes even superiors will become negative, overwhelmed by requirements, tasks, or animosity in their professional or personal life. The negativity they carry can quickly wear down an organization's culture and impact mission accomplishment. It is your job, regardless of your duty title, to ensure this corrosive negativity does not become contagious. Life in the military is not easy, but it becomes exponentially more difficult with a negative attitude. If you maintain a positive outlook and can see past the despondency of your current situation, you will mature into an organizational influencer whom leaders, peers, and subordinates rely on. They will look to you for sound advice, a good laugh, and sometimes just a place to hide for a minute away from it all. I challenge you to become that person for them - to be the calming steadfast presence that will stimulate positive growth in your organization.

When I was a Squadron Executive Officer, my unit was preparing for a National Training Center (NTC) Rotation and immediate follow-on deployment to OIR. In our situation, equipment and container load-out started one week after returning from a Brigade FTX, and the majority of equipment was shipping to OIR directly from NTC to accommodate our deployment timeline. The staff and companies were overwhelmed trying to plan and prepare for this endeavor while simultaneously executing the FTX. Not to mention, the unit was already fatigued from a brutal train-

up where they spent more time in the field than at home. This led to many individual and group engagements where the first statement was always, “There’s no way we can do this.” Leaders started to exude negative attitudes that were spreading throughout the ranks. The negativity was paralyzing. This was a critical moment for me. Of course, I had similar concerns, but no action would change the task in front of us. I could easily commiserate with everyone, but that would be an egregious failure in organizational leadership. Instead, I viewed this as an opportunity. I determined the single most impactful reaction I could have was to project positivity, trust, and confidence. Every time I interacted with an individual or group who poured out their concerns, I let them know that there was no doubt they would succeed. They just needed to put their head down and drive forward. I helped them lay out their tasks across time, prioritize them, and ensure the load was shared equitably across leaders in their subordinate elements. I told them to focus on the basics. They just needed to step back and take a deep breath; develop a simple plan, assign tasks to their leaders, and empower them. Finally, I charged all company commanders and XOs to develop a tracker visible to their units that showed progress over time, and to brief it daily. One of the top motivators of performance is progress. Soldiers need to see that they are advancing, overcoming challenges, and achieving goals. As a field grade, you have to be able to recognize negativity and combat it. A positive attitude that cultivates resiliency and messaging progress will help you overcome obstacles and accomplish tasks. If you walk into the job with this attitude and maintain it throughout, the effect is immeasurable. Morale will be higher and your leaders will be inspired to accomplish more than they think is possible.

LTC, Field Artillery, former SQDN XO, SQDN S3, REG XO

It is Okay to Let Them Lead

There is no better way to build a team than to grow and mentor your replacements. Being a field grade is not about who you are and what you have done. It is about building the team and accomplishing the mission together. If we start to show our company grade leaders what it means to put the team first, that the whole is always greater than its parts, and how to delegate tasks - not because we have the authority to do so, but because we have personally accepted the fact that we cannot do it alone, everyone will be more successful. Being a field grade does not mean you always have to be the leader or the one in charge. While you are the one responsible, you can allow your subordinates to take the lead. Provide your subordinates room and overhead cover to lead in an environment that allows them to learn from their mistakes. Of course, help them along the way and ensure the mistake will not cause damage to personnel or equipment. Challenge your subordinates to solve their own problems - to talk it out with their peers and solicit bottom up feedback from their teams and organizations. Mentor them to become the field grade peers you want - not the field grade peers that compete. Competition amongst company grades can be healthy, but competitive behavior as a field grade is corrosive - teach them that lesson. Demonstrate what it takes to build teams through your actions, because they are watching - they see how you treat your peers, leaders, and subordinates. Building teams takes time when you do it alone, but when you build a team of leaders capable of building teams themselves, you will have an immeasurable impact.

While serving as a BCT S3 I had the opportunity to assign two high performing pre-command captains with increased responsibility. I designated the first captain the lead planner for our company combined arms live fire exercise. During the planning window, the majority of the staff, to include all the field grades, traveled to JRTC to conduct LTP. I left the captain and a small team behind to continue planning and lane development. When I returned from LTP, we conducted an internal back brief and rehearsal. I knew the young captain possessed the most knowledge on the lane,

so I made the decision to have him lead the BCT leaders through our tactical execution without troops. He excelled, and validated the trust I placed in my leader team. The second pre-command captain was tasked to run current operations for all tactical training events. I empowered him as the battle captain to lead the brigade tactical operations center (TOC). Through his intrinsic motivation and our operational training events, he quickly commanded the respect of the brigade staff. During some command post and tactical exercises, I was encouraged to run the TOC when present, which would have relegated my battle captain to an overpaid RTO. I resisted this coaching, and my battle captain continued to run current operations. This decision solidified our mutual trust. He knew I believed in him, and as a result strove to be an expert. Again, my captain excelled during our home station culminating exercise and later at JRTC. In both examples I trusted my captains, gave them purpose and direction, and let them lead. You can't outpace the requirements of being a field grade. A major key to success is developing competence in your team and trusting them to be the experts.

LTC, Infantry, former Division Planner, BN S3, BDE S3

Lead with Compassion

Everyone is not born or raised with the same intellect or talents. Everyone is different, which is one of our most valued strengths. However, when we are trying to accomplish a mission, it can also be the largest irritation. None of us wants to halt progress because someone forgot or never learned. Individual responsibility should not affect mission accomplishment, but it does. You will be required to make that decision, probably more than once - will you stop progress to lead or will you lead progress despite the individual's

shortcomings. Ignoring the shortcoming will likely cause additional strain on the mission and other personnel, so what do you do? You have to take a tactical pause. Assess the shortcoming and determine the way forward, but how you do that will have consequences. As a field grade officer, everyone is observing you all the times. How you handle situations will affect your career, your reputation, and your evaluation. Yelling is not the best way to start. Neither is cursing nor throwing things (yes, it happens), but you cannot be a pushover. You have to walk a steady tightrope of corrective and constructive feedback despite your internal monologue. You will have subordinates and peers challenge you in public, you will have subordinates act in a manner that is two ranks below the one they currently wear, and you will have moments where leaders provide you constructive feedback in public. How you respond will define your legitimacy as a leader. Leadership is a practice, similar to medicine; our profession does not have a handbook that provides all the answers. You are going to find yourself in difficult situations with no real solutions and you will have to rely on compassion, morality, and empathy to get you through. Leading with compassion means extending a hand, and forgiving with maturity, while demonstrating to others the leader you want them to be.

As a Battalion XO, I had a very junior staff. My battalion was the only one authorized a CPT for the S3 while the rest of my peers had an equivalent MAJ to accomplish the mission. This coupled with having mostly LTs to fill the other staff positions comprised an inexperienced staff. Depending on your perspective, this can be a detriment or it can be an opportunity for mentorship or leading with compassion. This required patience, understanding, and accepting the fact that they were going to make mistakes such as imperfect slides, reports, and briefing faux pas. Would this have happened if I had a more mature, experienced staff? Maybe, but this opened up the door to lead with compassion, which means having the patience and willingness to teach in order to grow these leaders and help them realize their potential. We all

have a responsibility to invest in others and that means with our time, resources, and knowledge. In the end, this improves all of us as leaders and ultimately our organization, the Army.

MAJ, Logistics, former BDE BLST Chief, BN XO, and deputy G4

After all is Said and Done

Surviving your field grade time is hard, but becoming a successful field grade is even harder. You will be measured by more than just the expectations set before you. Your reputation as a leader and a peer is dependent upon the combination of your ability to accomplish the mission and the maturity with which you handle all situations. Leaders will assess your character as an officer based on the compassion you extend to others. The situations you will find yourself in will test your fundamental concepts of leadership. You get to choose how you employ the knowledge entrusted to you in privileged conversations with senior leaders. You decide what character traits to adopt and which ones to cast aside. Throughout your time as a major, you will or will not become an organizational influencer – the choice is yours. But first you must determine what you are willing to sacrifice to attain success.

There is more at stake now; your decisions go beyond your direct influence. Navigating this abstruse territory is difficult; however traits exhibited throughout the vignettes can and will increase your success. First: be authentic. The leaders who provided the supporting vignettes to this article are comfortable in their skin. They know they are human and do not always get it right, but their superpower is sharing their experiences with others. The goal is to not shy away from your experiences, but instead to embrace them and grow out of them – but learning as a leader is not an individual sport. Check on the subordinates, peers,

and leaders around you and determine who would benefit from learning this lesson alongside you. Let them share in your journey of discovery and let them observe your progression.

Second, understand and acknowledge that emotional intelligence has a critical place in our profession and succeeding as an organizational leader. You do not have to be able to read a room, but you have to be able to recognize when a situation is escalating into an unforecasted space that may require additional reinforcements. Field grades are required to build teams - not break them - and it takes empathy to build them well. You will rarely hear "good job," and easy days are far from often - but you will know you have succeeded as a field grade when a subordinate or a peer leaves your organization with one phrase, "it was a pleasure to serve with you." The mark of success on your time as a major is when others begin to identify you as a leader that brings people along with them instead of racing others to the finish line. Organizational leadership is about the team. As a field grade officer, you have a unique opportunity to not only influence, but build and fortify that team for future success.

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