



by Nate Bump

In an effort to illustrate the power and necessity for leaders to continuously review and reflect, this piece will share personal observations on squadron command in the US Air Force (battalion equivalent in the US Army). I gleaned these reflections from lessons learned and they represent both personal success and failures. Also, this is by no means an all-inclusive list as command tours vary, but will likely resonate in many ways across the services.

### **1. You Adapt to the Unit, Not the Other Way Around**

You likely didn't get to pick the unit you're commanding. You may not have even liked the idea of the unit you were selected to lead when notified! Even so, you must quickly adapt to the established unit culture. Your unit will slowly take on your personality, but don't expect it overnight. **Unless there was a toxic culture leadership before your arrival, your initial assimilation is critical to establishing an ideal vantage point for a time-**

**bound observation.** This period should avoid major changes if you're seeking truly long-lasting cultural (i.e. behavior) changes. Additionally, be cautious of the immediate staff requests after taking command. The staff likely asked your predecessor and they said no for a reason - they've been waiting to pose the same request to you.

Now, when does this period of time end? For some, it's 30, 60, 90, or even 120 days. For others, it's a week! Nevertheless, listen to your leadership "spidey sense" and don't hesitate to decisively act on something your gut, peers, or current boss may all agree makes sense to do now. Remember, you were chosen to lead a unit because of your demonstrated ability to make sound decisions and potential to lead. Your gut feeling is a reflection of the experience you've gained during your career, so don't ignore it!

## 2. **It's Not the Hands You're Dealt, It's How You Play Them**

Each command is different and challenging in its own way. Take the hand you're dealt and play it to the best of your ability with the information you have. And as your tour progresses, "re-deals" will provide additional opportunities. Like [poker](#), the concept of luck and timing while in command is critical to grasp as you can't control the existence of it (for better or worse), but you absolutely can control your response based on experience, information, and probabilities. **Most leaders are not judged on the emerging crises they encounter, but rather their response.** Take each hand as just that—one hand. Slowly build up positive momentum as you strive to get the best out of every single hand. Commanders must scan the horizon, evaluate their observations, and prepare accordingly. With routine environmental scans, you will rarely be caught totally unaware.

## 3. **Command Tours Are Long, But Not Really**

Many officers change roles continuously during their careers leading up to a command tour, so this could be your longest-held duty title! Nevertheless, two years isn't much when you consider the length of time it requires to implement significant change. **As in football, think about 'moving the chains' versus throwing a 'hail mary'.** It's the small wins each and every day, week, or month [compounding](#) for the big touchdown. Small, incremental wins are only effectively compounded by first examining the unit's mission, developing a clear vision, and implementing sound strategy to move the unit in the right direction to achieve big things.

### Mission, Vision, and Strategy - Know the Basics

In a [previous post](#), I reference Jim Collins' book [Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0](#) relating to

seven leadership styles of individuals from the most enduring and successful companies. Collins also lays out a general framework for an organization's mission (he calls it a 'purpose statement'), vision, and strategic approach (unit-level leaders may use the term 'planning'). The principles offer insight into Collins' work as it applies to a general military perspective in grasping these three essential areas for commanders.

### The Unit Mission - The "Why"

Largely static and typically non-negotiable at the unit commander level, your unit's mission is the reason for its very existence. Study up on this simple, but critical part of the unit. **A unit's mission is the reason it exists, and distinct, evolving culture is developed over the course of its lifespan.** For example, some units have [hundreds of years](#) or [over 100 years](#) worth of history executing a particular mission. Conversely, some units may have little to no history thereby providing you with an opportunity to be on the ground floor in shaping the unit's mission as it relates to history and culture. In any case, knowing this ahead of time provides you with a guidepost for linking future efforts at the tactical level to the larger enduring mission of the unit which is inextricably linked to the vision.

### The Unit Vision - Shared, Enduring, and Outlasting

A unit's vision is much more influenced by the commander than the mission and is the cornerstone of leading a unit. The vision is an enduring and inherently idealistic concept. **At its core, the vision is a story about the future told in the present.** As a commander, you must develop a clear, concise, and communicable vision to enable tactical operators with the ability to link daily actions to the unit's longer-term aspirations. As Collins emphasizes, "vision provides a context within which people at all levels can make decisions." As such, this context will form the foundation of a unit's strategy or plans for how they intend to reach this 'future destination.'

### The Unit Strategy or Plan - The Vision's Roadmap

The strategy is the roadmap for how the unit will reach for the vision and is greatly influenced (not independently written by) the unit commander. At the squadron level, strategy can also be substituted for the word plan (or plans) depending on your view of what echelon strategies of larger organizations like the military develop. Many times, a strategy will first inform the unit of what they're NOT going to pursue in order to clearly understand those lines of effort imperative to effectively execute the unit's mission. **Think of the vision as the 'where we're going' and the strategy as the 'how we're going to get there.'** When you develop a clear vision with discernible mileposts that is properly socialized within

the organization, your people are empowered to make decisions taking you closer to this shared vision. You spend less time giving daily direction and more time sustaining the longer-term strategy or plans. And once the vision is adopted, it will start to play out in the day-to-day culture (i.e. behaviors) of your personnel.

Strategies are not developed overnight. And effective strategies include both internal and external unit stakeholders. They also reach for big opportunities while ensuring existential functions survive and thrive. As Collins notes, “the essence of strategy should seize only the biggest opportunities, protect the unit’s proverbial flanks, and extend unit victories to positively impact the team for the long term.” All commanders come into the job with an ambition to move the unit to a better place quickly. However, time and care in developing a viable plan to do so cannot be overstated. This includes managing the expectations of what is truly in the realm of possible relating to unit-level influence over how a squadron can alter how they execute the mission.

Once selected for command, your professional preparation gains steam; a theme for commanders to understand what a mission, vision, and the strategy for guiding a unit will emerge. Since each of us comes with specific experience (or not) in these areas, it’s an important foundational skill every commander must grasp.

#### **4. Do Only What the Commander Can Do While Coaching Your Team Through the Rest**

Ensure your team is resourced, appropriately trained, and knows they can communicate as much as needed to get the unit’s work done. With these building blocks in place, trust that your team will execute while you stay on commander business. This includes tending to relationships with other commanders, your boss, perhaps your boss’ boss at times, and external agencies your unit needs to execute its mission. Commander business should also include personal investment in those ~20% of unit personnel who have an outsize impact on the unit’s effectiveness. That is, your highest performers.

One refrain I heard ahead of command was the saying “you will spend 90% of your time on the 10%,” this 10% representing underperformers and/or those with discipline issues. In my experience, this is misplaced thinking. Yes, you’re charged with upholding good order and discipline which will take more time upfront as you learn processes, but that doesn’t mean YOU must be principally focused on this aspect. Leverage the entire leadership team and external agencies up and down the chain of command to manage the underperformers. Then, start giving your time back to those who want and need it the most—your mid and top-level performers. **Commanders should be “feeding the hungry” by focusing on**

**developing and effectively employing those rising and top performers.** These leaders are the beating heart of your unit...strive to match your personal investment with them relative to their importance within the unit (current performance) and in their future potential.

Conversely, do not underestimate the outsize impact your role-modeling can have. Doing the small mundane tasks with your people such as cleaning up after a squadron event, picking up trash, playing the role as 'student' in a course they teach, or being taught a task they are responsible for offers you excellent opportunities to 'roll your sleeves up' alongside them and demonstrate a genuine interest in the unit's mission and people. Commander business includes role-modeling how you expect everyone to approach even the smallest tasks. Saying something is important can be easy, but the follow-through lies in your personal resolve to demonstrate the behaviors you seek from your team. Simple, but over the long run this is easy to forget. And like a garden, it must be tended constantly. **Remember, people can defy your words but never your actions.**

#### 5. **Don't Indict the Past Leadership Team**

It's amazing what people in and out of the unit will tell you about "the previous regime." Your unit leadership team must not be a part of this damaging discourse in any way. You have nothing but the information available to you now during your tour just like the previous team. **It's a dangerous game to armchair quarterback your predecessors, especially in the presence of other unit members.** Listen to those who want to provide information, but do not provide oxygen to any stories of past leadership team's shortcomings. And be mindful of the inevitable truth—you will soon be "the previous regime!"

#### 6. **Watch Your Pronouns-Language Matters**

Using 'they' about a particular problem or group of unit personnel? 'They' don't get it? Where's the 'I' in terms of accountability for why 'they' don't get it? 'You' or 'I' did something awesome? It's probably a 'we' story! **Own the failures, share the credit.** Jocko Willink says this well in his book [Extreme Ownership](#). In every situation I saw not going according to plan, I could connect something I was either directly, or indirectly, responsible for in the chain of events. One example is selecting and setting leaders up to take on long-term squadron projects (more on this below in #8). I initially expected leaders (typically Senior Non-Commissioned Officers or Officers) to 'figure it out' when it came to these slow-burn (but critical) initiatives and make quick progress. But when things stalled and my frustration grew, a post-mortem of a failed endeavor with the command team (Senior Enlisted Leader, First Shirt, and the Director of Operations) revealed I had either

ineffectively communicated, under-resourced, or both. Simply switching the pronoun in my 'why don't they get it?' question from 'they' to 'I' completely altered how I owned my part of unit failures while helping to avoid missteps on future projects.

## 7. **Command Is Not a Popularity Contest**

Charisma is great, but is not at the center of an effective commander's approach. Seek to be likable (agreeable in your approach) vs liked (popular). **If you're pleasing everyone, you're probably allowing sub performers a pass which can be demoralizing to your higher performers.** There will be some who are unhappy with your decisions, and that's ok (and one aspect of a healthy organization). A likable leader effectively and respectfully disagrees transparently within a consistent approach. They realize the jokes they've been telling for years aren't suddenly funny now! Self aware leaders also recognize the pitfalls of falling into unprofessional relationships. And remember, a commander's peer group is other commanders at an equivalent echelon. Unprofessional relationships are toxic to an organization's climate.

Further, likable leaders embrace tools like unit climate assessments, for better or worse. It's important to remember a unit climate assessment is inherently a tool for measuring "red line" issues and an outlet to pass complaints anonymously. Your tendency will be to focus on all the negative aspects within the report and 'fix it.' Take the feedback (own it all...it's YOUR squadron) while taking care to not discount negative feedback and disenfranchise those genuinely seeking to improve the unit. After immediately addressing any red line issues, accept or reject additional feedback based on trend data, and make a concerted and widely transparent effort to correct it. Your second assessment (normally around 16-18 months later) can also be a great tool for sharing improvements the unit has made in the initial assessment. Remember, these tools are going to be more negative so don't let them demoralize you! Conversely, don't miss an opportunity to share with the unit any positive trends they may contain.

Lastly, on being a likable leader—you must get comfortable having uncomfortable conversations. A mentor hammered this home to me before taking command and as I reflect it still rings true. We tend to shy away from the uncomfortable conversations necessary to quickly and correctly resolve small issues when, left unchecked, become big issues. I personally dreaded these types of engagements early on in my tour, but over time found when I 'leaned in' early and often significant issues could be avoided later.

## 8. **The Team You Want vs The Team You Have**

Unlike corporate America, most commanders don't get to handpick their teams. Our volunteer force structure and mammoth personnel systems ensure we get people of all backgrounds and capabilities. **You don't get to pick who is on your team, but you can control their roles, responsibilities, and how fast they develop.** There are exceptions based on specific skill sets but do not underestimate the power you have in placing people within the unit relative to their capabilities and leadership potential. In Dave Marquet's book, [Turn the Ship Around!](#), he proposes that **competence and clarity are the two most important aspects of building an empowered, high-performing team.** Focus on these two early in your command and the team you have can quickly transform into the team you need and want. You also need to determine if under-performing teammates should continue on the team. Is it a training issue or an attitude issue? If the teammate has an attitude issue and is unwilling to correct it, it's likely time for them to find a new team.

Just one caution in placing your high performers on big issues—too big of a problem without proper support and resources increases the risk of burnout or failure. So, be mindful of stacking the deck too lightly with the best people on your toughest problems. This is [the Goldilocks approach](#)...not too difficult, not too easy, but just right.

## 9. Protect the Asset (i.e. YOU)

Despite your best efforts, people will know when you're having a bad day. Over time, how bad those days are for you (and by extension your personnel and family) compound if you're not taking care of yourself. As a leader, you will spend a lot of time taking care of everyone else, but to do this at a high level consistently over a long period demands you put self-care high on the recurring priorities.

As a commander, you typically have the most control you've ever had of your time day-to-day. That being said, you can design your days and weeks around how you need to take care of yourself and your family physically, mentally, and spiritually. In my experience, this is another area where leaders love to hammer home to their subordinates the importance of self-care and will then disregard their own advice. So, **make self-care a priority by matching your rhetoric to your actions week in, and week out.** The power of role-modeling this aspect to your direct reports is imperative. In the end, you can say self-care is a priority; however, your actions will be the only thing your folks hear! For example, actually taking leave and disconnecting is a powerful signal from you to your second-in-command. Giving them the latitude and resources to fully step in while you're on leave demonstrates your willingness to not only take meaningful time off disconnected from your unit's business, but also allows you an opportunity to evaluate them in this role while you decompress.

## 10. **Be the Steward Leader the Unit Needs for Sustained Long-term Effectiveness**

In another section of his book, Marquet also discusses how to not only leave a unit better than you found it but also how to raise its effectiveness well after you're 'dead and gone.' One way he suggests doing this is to think of how you envision the unit six months after your command tour is over (in fact, he makes a case for commander evaluations to be closed out six months after they finish a command tour!). We all like to feel indispensable, but the reality is **your unit needs stewardship-leadership committed to a personality agnostic approach for the sake of long-term unit effectiveness.**

Steward leadership means putting the needs of the unit (i.e. the not always fun and most times difficult work) above what you may want (i.e. the usually easier, probably fun, and satisfying short-term work) as a leader. A steward identifies what the unit needs and begins the arduous process of leading and organizing a team committed to the same purpose. This purpose of laying down culture and processes as part of the unit's DNA to increase effectiveness over a long period of time is a command tour essential. Stewards transcend one set of leaders and [play the long game](#).

### **A Final Challenge - Integrating Reflection Into Your Battle Rhythm**

These reflections are a collection of two years of lessons learned, some more painful than others. They represent a deliberate attempt to learn ahead of command, accurately self-assess leadership blind spots while in command, and provide future leaders insight to leading small unit teams effectively. I challenge each of you to consider consistent review and reflection during your command tours and pay it forward!

Reflection is a critical skill to inculcate knowledge and wisdom, but is also something many of us have not made a priority as we continually are "overcome by events." And since reflection's effectiveness is difficult to quantify and largely an untaught skill in formal leadership training, it is easy to discount integrating it into our personal battle rhythm. Nevertheless, as I meditate on my command tour, it's evident that practicing routine reflection enabled me to endure the challenges, remain focused on the "big rocks," and provide those who will come after me insights into undertaking the most rewarding and challenging job of my career—squadron command.

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