



By Chad R. Foster

This might not be the outcome you expected or wanted. You might be shocked, excited, disappointed, or angry – perhaps all four at once. Regardless of what you know (*or think you know*), you are going to find that Garrison Command is one of the most challenging and rewarding assignments that any officer could ever receive. Unlike the vast majority of your peers, you will not have the luxury of leading a comfortably familiar type of organization. To say that Garrison Command forces you out of your “comfort zone” is an understatement. Each day will be a learning experience that tests you in ways that few other leadership assignments can match.

A Strategic Mindset

Say goodbye to the world of tactical thinking. The days of pondering the best location to conduct a breach or how best to employ indirect fires are over for you. A Garrison Commander operates at the strategic level, dealing with problems that are both complicated and inherently complex. Resources are finite, requiring difficult trade-offs in which there are frequently no good options. When one installation gains, others usually lose something

to make that possible. Your world will be dominated by Program Objective Memorandum (POM) cycles, long-term investment plans, business analytics, labor agreements, contracts, coordination with civilian agencies, and building relationships with the local community. For good measure, you still will have a foot solidly planted in the familiar world of training and live fire qualifications because the management of training enablers such as live fire ranges is a garrison responsibility. An enterprise-level context will inform nearly every decision, even those that seem small. The time horizons for garrison initiatives are normally measured in years and decades rather than weeks or months. You will find yourself planting seeds that will not come to fruition until long after your departure.

As a Garrison Commander, you will quickly find that your responsibility far outstrips your authority. Although your authorities will be broad, many of the individuals and groups whose cooperation is necessary for success do not work for you. In other types of commands, one can think primarily in terms of “superiors” and “subordinates.” In contrast, a Garrison Commander uses a mental framework that includes “partners,” “stakeholders,” and “audiences.” Depending on the topic, these groups may have only a limited motivation to cooperate. In this environment, negotiation and persuasion will be critical skills, and influence will be the currency of the realm. Emphasizing the importance of relationships has become almost cliché within the Army when discussing leadership, but nowhere is that statement more applicable than in Garrison Command.

Know your Boss(es)

You have more than one “boss” in this job. At times, these “bosses” can pull you in different directions simply because each will look at the same issues through different lenses. The challenge of balancing priorities and managing expectations will test you in ways that you may have not previously experienced. Above all, you have to maintain the trust and confidence of both “chains of command” in order to remain effective in your job.

Your most proximate “boss” (and your senior rater) will be the Senior Installation Commander. This individual is the ranking General/Flag Officer on the base who is charged with performing that role. He or she is the commanding general (CG) of a Division, Corps, or some other major command whose headquarters is located on the installation. A large part of your job as the Garrison Commander is to enable the Senior Commander to focus primarily on being the CG of his command rather than on being the CG of the installation.

The Garrison Commander is NOT part of the Senior Commander’s staff. Instead, you are a unit commander charged with what is probably the most complex mission of any other subordinate leader on the installation. In order to have a clear understanding of the Senior

Commander's intent and to be responsive to his or her concerns, you will need regular commander-to-commander dialogue as part of an established battle rhythm. Keeping external attendees to a minimum will be important in ensuring that no one mistakes these engagements for staff updates. Your subject matter experts will need to be in the room at times to provide support, but you will also need one-on-one conversations. Each engagement will be a chance to build and maintain the trust and confidence of your Senior Commander.

Your immediate "boss" within the Installation Management Command (IMCOM) chain will be a 2-star equivalent Senior Executive Service (SES) who leads one of the five functionally or geographically aligned directorates. As your rater, this "boss," called the IMCOM Director (ID), will serve as your link to the larger installation management enterprise. The ID will help you maintain perspective in terms of budgetary priorities, legal and policy constraints, and the wide variety of options available within IMCOM to address installation problems. He or she will be a valuable "lifeline" when you have questions or concerns. This is especially true should you find yourself in a contentious situation where the desires of your Senior Commander are at odds with those of the larger IMCOM enterprise. In such cases, your ID can help resolve the situation in a way that prevents you from being "caught in the middle."

Investing in Your People and Organization

Unlike other types of commands, you will be a virtual novice in many (if not most) of the areas for which you are now responsible. The learning curve will be steep and the expectations high. Despite this reality, the buck will stop with you - and that includes the responsibility to invest in the professional development of your team. The challenge lies in figuring out how best to do so.

A Garrison Commander has to find a way to help build the individual skills and collective effectiveness of a diverse team of civilian professionals. These civilians are, as a whole, older than previous audiences with which you have dealt as a leader. Many of them will be former service members. Others will be career civilians with a wide variety of professional experiences. Their commitment to duty matches that of the Soldiers whom they serve, but the personal priorities of your civilian teammates will reflect a more nuanced perspective. Understanding their developmental needs require a deliberate approach that will teach you a lot about them and yourself.

If your Garrison does not already have a civilian leader development program, create one. If

one already exists, figure out how to make it better. Lean on your civilian deputy and those in charge of your various directorates. Solicit a “bottom-up” perspective from the division chief level and below. Collaboration of this sort will improve the program and create buy-in at all levels. Your energy, prioritization, and fresh perspective can more than make-up for a lack of technical knowledge. Leaders show what is important to them by what they emphasize - and what better area of emphasis could one have than investing in your people?

As a Garrison Commander, you will have the chance to put to use all those books about leadership and organizational culture that you read over the years. If you did not read many of these, you need to get started now. Despite what you may have been told about the rigidly bureaucratic nature of a garrison, you will find that creative thinking and unconventional approaches are frequently necessary. Many of the “muddy boots” leadership principles with which you are already familiar are equally applicable in a garrison, but to truly invest in your team of civilian professionals you must cast your intellectual net much wider. In garrison command, the writings of authors such as Daniel Kahneman, Edgar Schein, and Peter Drucker will be as valuable (and sometimes more so) to those of George S. Patton.

Learn Fast and Enjoy the Ride

Being a Garrison Commander might not have been part of your professional goals, but rest assured that you are in for a challenge. There is no better assignment in which to test one’s leadership abilities - and tested you will be! While others talk about strategic thinking, you will practice it on a daily basis. The quality of the people with whom you have the privilege to work is second to none. The scope of the impact that you can have is magnitudes larger than what you might imagine. You will often find yourself struggling to shift mental gears from one subject to the next with no break, but that is part of what makes this job a fantastic experience.

Enjoy the ride. You are going to love it!

COL Chad Foster is currently the Garrison Commander at Fort Hood, TX. He is an Armor officer who has served in a variety of command and staff positions since being commissioned in 1998. He is a member of the Fort Hood People First Center’s Board of Directors.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)