



by Benjamin J. Elliott

If you can keep your head when all about you

Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,

But make allowance for their doubting too;

- Rudyard Kipling

To meet the high-demands of a fast-paced joint directorate front office at the forefront of the Department of Defense's [National Defense Strategy](#) implementation, my boss gave me a

simple instruction which I will paraphrase: the level of energy portrayed from your position will steer the entire organization.

The organization he referred to is the joint intelligence directorate responsible for reporting threat intelligence to the physically largest geographic combatant command in the Department of Defense. My position was the executive assistant to the two-star admiral in charge of all the intelligence delivered to the senior admiral. At first, I found this to be a bit unfair that a bit of voice modulation induced by my physiological responses to emotions left unchecked may send a 1,400 person directorate into “high-warble.” Yet, after living the job for 16 months, nothing was more paramount than the importance of composure.

Army doctrine describes composure as an imperative of our intellect, whereby the benefit of emotional balance encourages positive interaction with others, greater feedback from subordinates, and deeper shared understanding. [ADP 6-22](#), *Army Leadership and the Profession* goes on to say that effective leaders balance their range of attitudes and appropriately choose from the menu of interpersonal responses to “convey urgency without throwing the entire organization into chaos.”

Wise leaders have often said of those in the role of service to a senior executive is that they will know their effectiveness in the first 90 days. They will either fail or flourish in that timeframe, and the component of success strictly depends upon the steady, level headed approach to the demands of the environment the assistant is capable of navigating. I survived the demands, and I believe it is due to the [#onething](#) that was given to me long ago.

Upon my acceptance to the United States Military Academy, among the myriad cards, congratulations, and checks given to me to celebrate my accomplishment was a card-stock copy of Rudyard Kipling’s [poem](#) *If*. It would serve as my contraband hidden inside the front flap of my Bible—the one personal item I could bring with me to West Point. *If* starts with the half-stanza quoted above, followed by a sequence of other challenges faced by the reader, and ends by offering that if one is able to navigate the challenges, much good will come. I offer this poem and ADP 6-22’s paragraph titled “Composure” as companion pieces that I rely upon and take with me into each new assignment.

Benjamin J. Elliott is a Major in the U.S. Army. These views are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense. Editor’s Note: In June, we asked our [From the Green Notebook](#) community a simple but profound question: What’s the one thing you wish you would have known before you started your last assignment? This week, we are pleased to

share the nuggets of wisdom leaders have learned with the hope that it doesn't have to be relearned by someone else the hard way.

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