



Authors' Note: The authors of this post, @notyourtacommander and @therecoveringcommander, are mid-career, post company-command officers wallowing in their KD-complete broadening assignment lives and contemplating what's next. Referred to as the, "meme-lords of a generation" by literally no one, their views are their own and do not represent the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or From the Green Notebook.

Many a well-meaning senior leader shares their personal leadership philosophy or a, "how to handle me" letter and while it's important to understand, "how the boss thinks", we feel that many of our leaders fail to understand us as well. Especially in the Profession of Arms, we are duty-bound to obey orders that are legal, moral, and ethical. Yet, as much as leaders say that they want candid feedback, there are "unspoken truths" that are often contradictory to the "unspoken norms". Dr. Lenny Wong demonstrated that the [Army has a problem lying to itself](#) and [this problem persists](#).

We offer these perspectives as the junior military officer audience that [LTC Dominick Edwards sought to reach \(on this same website no less\) in 2016](#). By no means is this a

response or rebuff of his points: the authors of this article were First Lieutenants when LTC Edwards published this piece and could very well have been the ratees he sought to reach. We find many of them to be clear and relatable and with a few more years of service, may find ourselves agreeing with even more. Moreover, sharing your ideas publicly is admirable and we are grateful that leaders such as this consistently give of themselves to the profession. Thank you, Sir. Truly.

Despite claims of open door policies and that “feedback is a gift”, we humbly offer some truths that those you senior rate may hesitate to share with you and a handful of tips to help you understand their perspectives. Here are 16th truths your ratees believe you don’t understand and aren’t willing to risk telling you:

1. The feedback you say you want and the feedback you act like you want are not the same. Many leaders espouse ideas like, “Feedback is a gift,” and, “Feedback is the breakfast of champions.” Often, their actions show otherwise. If you’ve ever held a sensing session or a town hall where you spent as much or more time talking as the people you solicited feedback from...here’s your sign. Many subordinates (including some of yours) think that when you say you want candid feedback, you actually mean that you want to be told what you want to hear because of the way you act once you receive this feedback. When you solicit feedback, you don’t need to explain or justify or shut down the commenter ([some great tips on soliciting feedback in the Army right here](#)). It will take work, but you have to establish trust with your formation that your subordinates (especially your command teams) feel comfortable being blunt with you at times. LTG Jim Rainey and COL Daniel Blackmon offer an [idea that candor and loyalty are not juxtaposed](#) and you may find his approach palatable for your team too.

2. Long speeches at mass formations are counterproductive. Few Soldiers care what you have to say when it is to a large audience, but it’s not you; blame the impersonal nature of the address, or the psychological diffusion of responsibility to listen. Truly, even some of your junior officers will tune you out. Save speeches and ceremonies just for your command teams and staff. If you want to address Soldiers, do it briefly, do it in small groups or organic encounters as you walk around the AO, or actually participate in training events. If you do participate in training events and want to provide some context and leadership thoughts, do what you would do with any other public address: rehearse! And by rehearse, we mean practice what you’re going to say so that you can deliver something relevant in two minutes or less. Joe McCormack offers that people fail at impactful brevity due to a combination of [overexplaining, underpreparing, and missing the point](#). In order to have your point of aim be your point of impact (with your words), he says you should, “Map your message, lead with a headline, and trim the excess.” LTG Milford H. Beagle Jr., commander

of the Combined Arms Center [frequently quips](#), “If you haven’t said it in 30 days, you haven’t said it.” Use your headlines.

3. Am I meeting your goals or are meetings your goal? I spend an inordinate amount of time in meetings. Unless it is a group collaboration (if you have to think about it, it probably isn’t), then meetings are where information is shared; work is generally not accomplished in meetings. There may in fact be a lot of preparation work done for the meeting that is literally just changing the way the information is presented. Time is a zero-sum game and the impact to my ability to accomplish your priorities is absolutely crushed by the amount of time I have to spend in meetings, despite the fact that the excessive meeting culture is well-documented as impacting the [time available for the crucial and creative solo “deep work”](#) as well as the collaborative energy [needed by teams to to work on longer term and more complex goals](#). While [Elon Musk’s six rules for meetings](#) may work at SpaceX and Tesla, they war with some of the Army’s standard operating procedures; still, carefully assess the way your organization meets to ensure it contributes to your mission.

4. The only thing worse than standing on ceremony is running on it. Formation runs have their place. But the idea that they build esprit de corps is questionable at best and dead wrong at worst. Don’t believe me? Ask your soldiers which experiences in the Army have been the most meaningful and team building. The Division run for All-American week or the *infrequent* Friday formation run are more than sufficient to meet that goal but “best of” challenges involving fitness, cohesion, or even MOS skills will keep more Soldiers more engaged. It also gives an opportunity to recognize excellence and provide candid feedback for those that need improvement, whereas formation runs (usually) result in two groups: those that finished with the group and probably did not get much out of the run and the handful that had to be scooped up by the fall-out NCO who now have to go stand before the senior NCO of the formation for their public flogging.

5. The times they are a-changing: MySpace is older than the smart phone and the Iraq War was getting ready to transition to stability operations before MySpace even became mainstream. We understand the saying, “the more things change, the more things stay the same” but it is important to acknowledge the differences in our experiences too. When today’s senior leaders were company commanders, the prevalence of cell-phones and the desire for continuous and instantaneous information was not what it was today. In an Army at war, field losses and property damage were easier to swallow and the transition to a garrison Army means that deployments as a benchmark of valuable experiences will become less and less prominent. Before you dispense advice that starts with, “when I was in your shoes”, you should double check where you left them.

6. “Let the boys play!”: Portraying legendary high school football coach Herman Boone in *Remember the Titans*, Denzel Washington implores the referees to stop meddling in the game. Similarly, let your leaders lead. You were a successful (or at least successful enough) Platoon Leader or Company Commander. Let your leaders take risks and the initiative, but also let them stumble and fail in order to learn. There’s a difference between relieving someone because of ethical violations, gross incompetence, or willful negligence and letting them mess up but keeping them on the job so they can grow; not everything is a “no-fail-mission,” but not letting people fail enough will guarantee that they won’t learn. You can let them fail without being failures. If you want to really open their eyes, be willing to share your own experiences with failure and the leadership stories that don’t have the Hallmark happy endings. Tell them about the times you got it wrong; it will humanize you and help create that culture of growing from mistakes, rather than hiding or trying to avoid them.

7. Approachable, with caution: Having an open-door policy is a moot point if you have a personal security detail blocking it, whether that’s subordinate raters or members of your staff. Yes, the chain of command should be utilized (or at the very least notified) first, and handling issues at the lowest level with the minimum amount of time and resources necessary should be the primary course of action. That said, those you senior rate should be able to approach you directly without having to deal with an awkward or intense interrogation from their rater, nor should you hold it against their rater if that individual does seek out your guidance. Also, your staff serves as an extension of you; every effort should be made to hold them as accountable as you hold your subordinate units. Hiding behind them to let them be the “bad guy” or letting them invoke your name in vain to cover up their incompetence is a sure way for subordinate units to feel unsupported.

8. Wise Counsel: If your CSM (or you) is going to browbeat lower echelons on counseling packets, you owe your subordinates the same. Your subordinates deserve the same level of performance feedback at regular intervals that you expect they are providing to their subordinates; counseling packets are a tool to accomplish this. Further, per [AR 623-3, Evaluation Reporting System](#), you must furnish your evaluation support form to those you rate and senior rate at the beginning of the rated period. As with any technique in the Army, there is an Army Techniques Publication ([ATP 6-22.1 The Counseling Process](#)) that outlines some of the more specific elements of counseling to help you with this. Also, [counseling is separate and distinct from coaching and mentorship](#). Depending on your relationship with the individual and their developmental needs, you may want to consider an alternative approach. [Table 6-3 in ADP 6-22 clearly elucidates the differences between these](#).

9. Show up and just say hi. Nonthreatening unannounced visits without your entourage do more to encourage a culture of accountability than making an example out of those that

deviate from cultural norms. At higher levels of leadership, you will interact with the individuals you lead less frequently. Stopping by a units' area of operations to interact with Soldiers in a less formal setting can give you better insight as to the state of the organization at lower levels but it can also humanize you to your Soldiers and help you understand their pain points better. [COL Mike Kloepper's, the current 173rd Infantry Brigade Commander, Instagram page](#) is a daily feed of Soldiers doing Soldier things (along with some leadership quips and the occasional dad-joke). When he and other leaders like him talk about cultures of accountability and bringing out the best in our organizations, his interactions with Soldiers are no small part of that.

10. Hell and Farewells. Doing work things after work is still work. Holding work events outside of working hours where attendance is highly encouraged (*threateningly glares in senior rater*) is still work. Not only that, deconflicting work schedules and childcare (or for your single leaders, date night and personal time) for a frequently crowded and often awkward event is less than ideal. [While the ambiguity of mandatory fun events exist in the private sector as well](#), some of your junior officers will stress more about these events than enjoy them. To improve attendance and outcomes, consider smaller, more intimate events for after hours and family welcoming and hailing/farewelling people during work hours where you'll have more people present anyway. The size of your organization and frequency of new/departing faces should drive this, not the boss's preferences. For example, a line battalion will probably have a few new faces every week or so and it would be easy to recognize that person as a new teammate in front of the battalion at the weekly motorpool formation. Their company or staff section or platoon will almost certainly have their own way of welcoming them and their family by virtue of their proximity and the size of their subgroup.

11. Mandatory fun events are always the former, rarely the latter. Continuing in the vein of family, my working spouse and the challenge of linking up schedules does not mean I'm sequestering my family away from you; I just don't know how much of a "huge opportunity" or "great experience" it is for them to see the people I work with on a monthly/quarterly basis. If you're the type of person who can't just meet my family at a work function without assessing my spouse for her potential for future service or the behavior of my children after being dragged to an event that's at the end of the day (which interrupts their regular routine and is less about their entertainment), then this tells me you expect me to use my family to look good in front of you rather than for me to take into consideration the needs and scheduling concerns of my own spouse and kids. Spousal/family involvement with the military shouldn't warrant 20% of the advice you have for those you senior rate. My wife may not be interested in being a "senior spouse" and I'm still figuring out if I want to

continue to give to this organization (see point #3) at the expense of the stability that many “[military brats](#)” lack during their formative years.

12. One is an even lonelier number. It’s not just those with families that have an eye towards acceptable work-life balance. Even geographic bachelors and bachelorettes or those without spouses value their personal time and often don’t desire to work unnecessarily on their personal time. Individual personal time is just as valuable and may include travel to see family or even traveling to date as many military bases are not near [major social scenes](#). This is even more important when family-oriented unit events are held, especially those specifically geared towards kids. Expecting your single, twenty-something leaders to take 2-3 hours on a Friday night to attend an event at a bowling alley or with a bounce house has morbid implications for their plans to leave the local area and head to a more social scene, especially in light of the [challenges that the pandemic has raised in regards to the dating scene](#).

13. We are probably not a family. It’s ok that we’re [not “a family” at work](#). We can be congenial and even highly effective coworkers without being a family ([calling us a family is actually shown to be a contributor to burnout](#)). This distinction is important; I will do this for 5 or 10 or 20 years but I will be with my actual family for much longer. I fully grasp how, “my entire family is serving” but if I’m a more junior officer, then I’m probably less sure if I’m staying in the Army for a full career. With [the blended retirement system](#), it’s more reasonable than ever to leave at the 4, 8, or even 12 year mark and begin a new career or go back to school. The goal is that my family will be there when I transition, whether that’s after 4 years or 40, and I know my fun Lieutenant experiences will be vastly different from what I expect my O3/O4/O5 time will be. It appears that most jobs after company command fall in 2 categories: 1) necessary evils required so I can do well/look good/get promoted/command again or 2) super cool opportunities that probably incur an ADSO. If I’m not chasing field-grade command or stars, then it may make more sense to depart sooner rather than later, for the sake of myself, my family, and the aspirations and norms of my next career. It’s a decision I don’t take lightly as I don’t forget the impact it has on my family.

14. It’s hard to be honest about my future career plans. Officer’s will be completely honest with you about their career plans if 1) their career goals are *genuinely* to be exactly like you, 2) they are within a retirement window, or 3) if they are ready to accept the (real or perceived) consequences of signaling their intent to depart active-service. Regardless of commissioning source, many officers were raised to believe that securing “top block” evaluations is the only way to guarantee the chance of future promotion. Even if this is not entirely true as the Army tries to manage its talent better through [Talent Based Branching](#)

and the lukewarm codified nepotism of the [AIM 2.0 Marketplace](#), many officers harbor the (anecdotally valid) fear that they will be written off as a lost-cause and taken out of the “good jobs” and away from Soldiers if their uncertainty about remaining in the Army long-term becomes known. Leaders should not ostracize their subordinates or treat them as second-class citizens just because they have not yet committed to staying, “the full 20.” When you treat subordinates that plan to transition out of the Army poorly, you send the message that their worth is tied only to what labor they provide to you and that their desire to leave the organization signals the end of that usefulness. Harvard Psychologist Amy Edmonson [talks about psychological safety in a way that is relevant to most workplaces](#). Also, just because I don’t own a dress mess or bullion rank prior to CCC doesn’t make me any less of a team player.

15. Where there’s a bill, there’s a way: Working spouses (whether at home businesses, remote jobs, or even work outside the home) are much more the norm than the exception nowadays. Most military families believe [more than a single income is required for financial security](#), despite the fact that many military spouses must deal with underemployment and employment gaps due to the challenges of military life. It’s not just “ok” that my spouse works; precious few spouses (even on an O3/O4 salary) are not seeking work nowadays, even before the runaway “post-covid” inflation. Separate from recent worldwide pandemics, the skyrocketing cost of [education](#), [childcare](#), [housing](#), and [healthcare](#) may have forced this return to work for previously non-working spouses. It is also not uncommon for them to be similarly or better educated and with better job prospects separate from their federally employed spouse. Balancing my spouse’s desire or need for a professional career is another thing that may weigh more heavily on me than on previous generations of junior officers.

16. Field Grades and Glass Houses: You may be judging me based on my family but verily I say unto you that you are judged on how you conduct your personal life as well. How I choose my spouse says a lot about me, but how you treat your family surely says as much about you. I’m not inclined to share my desire to be a present father and husband if I suspect that this information will be weaponized against my future career goals. If it’s unclear that you make time for your family outside of the occasional dinner [it doesn’t give me hope for my future as a field-grade officer](#). I’m guarded about articulating that to a senior rater who may use that information against me.

If you’ve read this far and are committed to staying for 20 years (or already have), you may be bristling with indignation.

And rightly so.

“What happened to selfless service? Why do these woke millennials and zoomers need safe spaces and reassurance? What happened to serving for the sake of serving?”

Surely your motivation (and that of all of your counterparts that stayed or are staying for 20 years) for joining the Army hinged solely on the patriotism and valor associated with a career in the Profession of Arms and that at 17 to 21 years old, you always knew that you’d serve, “as long as they’ll let me”. Touting educational benefits, specialized job training, and pay have been hallmarks of the Army’s recruiting efforts, [from the early Cold-War period well beyond the transition to the All-Volunteer Force](#) and has been continued in its newest, [“What’s Your Warrior” campaign](#).

Yet, the Army struggles with [quality junior officer retention](#), and while [differences correlate with commissioning source, race, and gender](#), research also supports that an officer’s [first battalion commander having a disproportionate impact](#) on their decision to continue service. In a near-peer conflict, we won’t enjoy the overwhelming technological advantage we saw for two decades in the middle east. Understanding your junior leaders’ pain points means you will be able to address them. Eliminating roadblocks and setting conditions for them to do their best work puts them (and you) in a position to win. [It matters.](#)

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