



by Kyle McCarter

I recently completed a year as the Executive Officer of Task Force Sinai in Egypt and Israel, part of the 13-nation [Multinational Force and Observers](#). I personally and professionally learned a great deal throughout the 12 months, and I am still mentally processing that time. This post will not teach you to be a brigade level executive officer by discussing 'colors of money,' supply chains, fleet maintenance, CSDPs, or staff training. There are plenty of resources and articles for digestion by future executive officers. Below are ten observations on leadership from my time in Task Force Sinai and the Multinational Force and Observers that I wanted to share to promote leader discussions and improve the force.

1. "Get off your cross, we need the wood." This was a great quote from a member of the French Contingent in our unit. She meant that complaining gets you nowhere, breaking down the team, degrading trust, and making you unapproachable when a problem arises. If

your complaint involves a person or any command level, you are usurping that leader's or command's ability to lead their organization effectively. The time you use to complain is wasted and could have been used to fix the problem, improve a system, or build a new relationship. More importantly, there are countless Soldiers in your formation shouldering untold burdens and stresses. When you complain, it can belittle their effort or discourage them from pushing toward the objective.

2. Blame is a waste of energy. The New Zealand Contingent commander repeated this point on every possible occasion. Every single mistake is a learning opportunity. No matter how insignificant or catastrophic the mistake or failure, you can use it to improve your systems and build the team. During the AAR process of an event, it is vital to focus on systems and processes that can be improved and not on the human(s) that caused the failure. By moving the crosshair off the poor lieutenant, the GS11, or Sergeant and placing it on an SOP or command program, you fix the issue long-term and help to develop the individual. When Soldiers feel confident that they can make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and not lose their careers, they will be more creative, innovative, and willing to execute in the absence of leadership.

3. Be present. This one is obvious but often overlooked by leaders at all levels. Be actively engaged in SHARP and EEO training events. Compete in unit PT events, Turkey Trots, or lifting challenges (you don't have to win). Eat in the mess hall with your Soldiers. Be present at promotions and reenlistments. Go to BOSS events, MWR trips, book clubs, and game nights. Lead and teach in OPDs and NCOPDs. You do not need to be the best at these events or the subject matter expert in everything. But you need to be present. Why? The fruits of this small amount of effort create massive amounts of trust in your formation, builds the team, and makes you approachable to your Soldiers.

4. No French Waiters. You are not expected to be perfect or have a photographic memory. Write things down, take notes, make a due out list, and write executive summaries. Throughout the day, you will be approached by your leadership, peers, commanders, staff, and Soldiers. Everyone you interact with will have a need, an idea, or a plan of action. Refrain from letting those interactions be wasted (or a task dropped because you failed to write it down and review your notes at the end of the day).

5. Do not let superfluous boundaries stop you. My battle buddy, the Task Force S3, taught me to look across boundaries to seek solutions. Being deployed in Egypt and Israel brought many challenges related to logistics, troop movements, and staffing actions, all tied to boundaries. Egypt is part of the African continent but not part of USAFRICOM. Israel recently transferred to USCENTCOM but has closer ties to USEUCOM's Mediterranean

countries. Our unit's mission is peacekeeping in a COCOM traditionally associated with war. We had different higher headquarters for administrative, operational, and technical controls. These are all boundaries. It is vital to look across boundaries for other sourcing solutions to your issues, especially if you are on the seam between COCOMs or have different 'parent' commands. You have to think outside the box. You will miss opportunities if you look at your problem set through a lens guided by boundaries.

6. Be a Student. As an executive officer, you will instantly be outside your comfort zone regardless of your primary branch. As an active duty Military Intelligence Officer, I quickly realized how little I knew about the Army when I assumed responsibility for fixed-wing and rotary-wing assets, medical clinics, dog teams, explosive ordinance detachments, sustainment yards, maintenance units, and Soldiers from across the Reserves, National Guard, and the Active Duty. The only way you can survive and be efficient in that position is by relying on the expertise of your Warrant Officers, NCOs, and Soldiers. As soon as you assume the position, schedule time with the experts in your formation to teach you their systems and processes. Modify or establish a unit LPD program to include academics from various specialties in the formation. Most importantly, do not be afraid to raise your hand when you do not understand and ask for clarification.

7. Operations Run at the Speed of Relationships. Our counterparts hailed from Australia, Canada, Columbia, the Czech Republic, Fiji, France, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay and operated on vastly different tempos than the American Contingent. In a multinational environment, American culture, hastiness, results-based focus, and candor can cause issues. I found that early morning walks or runs to talk with the Fijians and Columbians, leaving your desk for teatime with the British and Canadian troops, and having a cappuccino with the Italians and Norwegians are all vital to building relationships. Other cultures are hesitant to work with or trust you in an operational environment without a relationship. These relationships also build a lasting connection that could bear fruit in future assignments.

8. Build Your Bench. Our Canadian and American Command Sergeant Majors championed the development and empowerment of Soldiers and NCOs. Unfortunately, the Staff Officer will often go to every meeting, working group, or IPR while the NCOs and Soldiers remain back in their shops. Do not let this happen. Format your battle rhythm to have meetings, IPRs, and events be designed and led by the NCOICs or Soldiers in the staff. You will experience an initial breakdown in communication and information flow, which will improve over time. You will see two positive results from this process in the long run. First, your staff primary gets vital time back on their calendar. Second, you are giving responsibility to the next generation of our Army's leaders, exposing Soldiers to greater resources and

capabilities and improving the depth of your staff's bench (vital in a conflict).

9. Emotions Matter. Sometimes it is easy to forget that emotions matter or can drastically impact military operations. It is vital to maintain composure and exude a calming presence. The loss of composure, or 'Presence' in American doctrine, can shred the confidence of your subordinates and peers and quickly erode mission success. The commander from the Czech Republic Contingent was often seen as stoic and a calming influence during stressful events. When asked for advice to remain calm under pressure, his answer was simple, "Despite the fact that I am angry right now, I am smiling." He understood that some emotions are vital to share and project while others must be controlled and only shared behind closed doors to a small inner circle.

10. Maintaining Standards. Finally, "The standard you walk past is the standard you accept." The commander of the Multinational Force and Observers from New Zealand consistently trumpeted this message. As he moved across the area of operations, he never once walked past a Soldier operating outside of established standards, irrespective of their nationality. He knew that in any military organization, regardless of garrison operations or deployed in a combat zone, a degradation in discipline and standards would eventually lead to death or serious injury. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every leader at every rank to enforce standards in uniforms, vehicle and aviation operations, safety, hygiene, intelligence and operational reporting, radio etiquette, and much more. Every discrepancy walked past or ignored establishes the new normal. Broken glass is not sustainable.

Closing Thoughts. As an executive officer, you are like any other officer, warrant officer, or Soldier - you are a leader. The ten observations described above can be applied to most leadership positions in our Army and, in many cases, to the armies of our Allies and Partners. Leaders cannot complain in front of the formation, and the blame does not lead to development. Presence matters, take notes, do not let boundaries prevent victory, never stop learning, build relationships and partnerships, develop your subordinates, control your emotions, and maintain standards and discipline. Each observation is simple in its lane but can be difficult with the other leadership challenges. Therefore, it is essential to take a step back regularly and reflect or self-assess how you are doing as a leader.

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Author's Note: I captured the observations in this article in my green notebook - cliché I know. But, joking aside, I would transcribe quotes from leaders, peers, and Soldiers daily. I

would capture anything that made me pause, sparked an idea, or made me rethink a personal choice in my past. Then, when I had time on the weekend in the barracks or during a long stationary bike ride, I would flip through the quotes from that week, reflect on their meaning, and try to organize them into themes with quotes from previous weeks. Over time this process began to reveal the direction or mood of the formation on the one hand and shine a light on my personal growth and development on the other hand. This short article is a drastically condensed version of those notes.

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