



by Nikiay Comer

Graduation week is here and you've felt a wave of emotions in anticipation of its arrival. You're looking forward to accepting your diploma in front of your family and friends who have traveled far and wide to support you on this special day. You will soon be a commissioned officer.

For some, commissioning is a time to be joyful and excited about what the future brings. For you and others, commissioning brings excitement from completing a milestone but also uncertainty—*anxiety*—about the future. You're not sure if you're ready. Although you have put so much hard work into preparing yourself to be a leader, you wonder if you've learned enough. As a cadet, you have completed many types of military training, leadership and character development lessons, and physical readiness classes. Even still, you may think you're not ready. But I'm here to tell you that you are. It is okay that you don't know everything there is to know about leadership. Knowledge will come with experience. However, at this very moment, you have what you need to be a good leader.

### **Good Leaders Do These Three Things**

What is a good leader anyways? There are three main tenets of leadership I've learned since commissioning.

First, *good leaders show up*, even in difficult times. Up until this point, being a leader in your controlled environment has been relatively easy. You have led nearly always under supervision, and the true consequences of your mistakes have been minimal. Real life leadership, however, is a burden. A burden because of the responsibilities that will lie heavily upon your shoulders. Others will rely on you in situations where you might not feel prepared. At the absolute worst point in a training exercise, bureaucratic snafu, or even a deployment, your Soldiers will be looking directly at *you* for help. You will be pushed not just tactically but interpersonally—you may even have to directly help Soldiers considering taking their own life.

Real life leadership, outside a controlled environment, is also a blessing. A blessing because you will get the opportunity to show up to work each day and choose to make an impact on your Soldiers. I specifically use the words "opportunity" and "choose" to highlight a major difference between leaders mailing it in and leaders who truly invest in their teams. Be that leader that goes beyond their stated scopes and responsibilities. Be the leader that leaves a lasting impact amongst those you interact with. Don't shy away from the hard challenges but take them head on, learning from each one. Because if you only choose to be a leader when it's easy, you will never become one.

Second, *good leaders develop and take care of their soldiers*. There are few greater feelings than seeing your Soldiers succeed because you took the time to develop them. In addition, the welfare and safety of those Soldiers will be directly on you. Every decision you make, in garrison or on the battlefield, will directly impact your Soldiers. Despite your nervousness, hold onto this: if you put your people first, they will do the same for you.

Third, I've learned that all leaders, good and bad, make mistakes—the difference is that *good leaders grow from them*. As a newly commissioned officer, you will be expected to make mistakes. Embrace them! Making mistakes proves to your Soldiers that you are a human being too. At the same time, show them how to take responsibility and how to learn from those mistakes. What matters is how you grow from them. Plus, once your soldiers get to know the real you, flaws and all, they will have your back forever.

### **And What If You're Not Respected?**

You may still be wondering if you will be respected. The hard reality is: not always. You may not be respected because of many different factors, whether it is your race, gender, size, or other things outside your control. If your experience is anything like mine, you will find yourself working with leaders and Soldiers who are not accustomed to working with someone that looks like you. Even though mentioned in the classroom, these barriers will be firsts for you—and unspeakably difficult.

But don't worry, you still have the necessary tools to succeed. I encourage you to use even the bias and malalignment as another opportunity. The opportunity to show others—superiors, peers, or subordinates—that you have what it takes. And that next time they encounter an individual that looks like you, they should accept them with open arms because you have given them a positive leader to look back upon.

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You're not crazy, your current fears are warranted. They're thoughts all good leaders have had. I was nervous too. And yes—absolutely—some of my fears came true. Like all other leaders, I have faced and continue to face tough decisions in positions of responsibility. However, there hasn't been a decision that I have had to make that I regret or would change if I had the opportunity to go back in the past. Trust the training that you have been provided because you have everything you need to be a great leader—and I know that you will be!

*First Lieutenant Nikiay Comer graduated from the United States Military Academy in 2019, where she majored in Engineering Psychology. Upon graduation, she commissioned as a Quartermaster officer in the active-duty Army. Currently, she serves as an Executive Officer in the Future Soldier Prep Course (FSPC) at Fort Jackson, SC. Nikiay is passionate about helping others and positively impacting the world around her.*

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