



By Dave Leydet and Ryan Stephenson

The transition from company grade to field grade leadership is met with numerous maxims, such as “moving from direct to *organizational* leadership,” “Iron Majors run the *organization*,” and “relationships matter.” We were exposed to several of these sayings from our mentors and through the curriculum of the Command and General Staff Officers’ Course. Despite their overuse, these phrases contain sage wisdom. One common theme emerges: field grade officers’ primary responsibility is to their organization—and this means relationships matter just as much, if not more. We argue that building and maintaining strong relationships is one of the most important factors toward field grade officers’ professional and organizational success.

The importance of interpersonal relationships is no secret for those who study and practice leadership. You simply cannot lead people if you cannot build and maintain relationships with your superiors, peers, and subordinates. Transactional relationship building approaches can yield short-term results, however, if you are truly going to propel the organization forward, building genuine relationships with your fellow field grade officers is crucial. Consider our experience and lessons learned through our trials and tribulations as the operations officer (S3) and executive officer (XO) for the 1st Space Battalion.

We moved into our positions during the spring of 2021, with Dave taking over from Ryan as the S3 and Ryan moving up as the XO. Before transitioning our duties, we had consistent dialogue with each other discussing everything from training priorities, strategy, warfighting, and, most importantly, who we were as people. This time to prepare was vital to successfully running the 1st Space Battalion; an organization that consists of eight subordinate units—commanded by a mix of majors and captains— with half of its units forward stationed or deployed overseas. This blend of garrison and globally deployed missions places the battalion staff in a constant state of bridging the operational and force-generating sides of the Army. This unique condition complicated the duties of the XO and S3, and cemented four important lessons.

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Lesson 1: Understand your Field Grade counterparts and their background story

The foundation of any relationship is understanding. Fortunately, we had shared experiences - growing up in the Northeast and attending the same college. We were both cadets at Norwich University and while we weren't in the same social circles, our shared background helped us understand each other more quickly and frame how we each saw the world. This eventually developed into an understanding of how each other approached operational and tactical problems. This understanding then allowed us to better orient the staff and organization when planning for operations. Both of us benefited tremendously from this shared background.

Without an immediate background connection with a peer, you need to take the time to better understand their worldview, empathize, and learn how their life experience contributes to their decision-making. What is your perception of your peers? Is their personality cemented from a regional culture, a particular educational experience, or values from their family life or upbringing? You must use every opportunity you have to understand and build a model in your own mind of how your peers think.

Lesson 2: Acknowledge and leverage each other's strengths

Building off lesson 1, we understood each other's strengths and weaknesses. With 10+ years of experience as a space officer, Ryan was well-versed in high-level strategy, force design, and space operations. Dave only had 2 years of space experience but brought other strengths: strategic and operational planning as well as leadership development. There was certainly an overlap between our experiences and leadership philosophies; however, when situations called for a certain approach or knowledge set - that person took the lead. This lesson was critical as the battalion entered the initial stages of a force design update (FDU) and simultaneously preparing to execute a major operational deployment. While we each had responsibilities for both events, we leveraged the expertise of Ryan for the FDU, leaving Dave to lead the staff efforts for the deployment. This approach allowed us to best position the organization to meet its requirements.

Lesson 3: Collaboration, not competition

Let's address the elephant in the room - the S3 and XO typically share the same rater and senior rater. Anecdotally, some peers expressed a competitive attitude toward their field grade counterpart(s), approaching it from a win-lose perspective with regard to evaluations. This is a short-sighted view that limits field grades from fulfilling their obligation to improve their organization. Infighting, overt or not, has a detrimental effect on the climate of your organization. You don't need to see eye-to-eye with your field-grade counterparts, but you do need to push the organization forward together.

This may seem obvious; however, we've all experienced organizations with palpable tension between the XO and S3, creating turmoil for the organization. In the worst cases, this tension can spread amongst all the Majors within a brigade, ruining cohesion across adjacent battalions and between staff echelons. There is little an individual officer in one of these positions can do to prevent a culture of infighting from forming; however, they can set the example through collaboration with their peers and carefully managing the competitive mindset. The larger lesson for raters of junior field grade officers is that ensuring collaboration must be a constant effort. Senior field grade officers must be vigilant of their subordinates' work relationships to understand when competitive behavior crosses the line from supporting organizational performance, to destroying team cohesion.

Lesson 4: Distinct roles, shared responsibility

The XO and S3 have distinct roles in the organization. The XO is the chief of staff who synchronizes the staff sections during the planning process and assumes command of the

battalion when needed. The S3 is responsible for training and the operations process. Each of these roles is important in assisting the commander in commanding the formation. While the roles are distinct, the XO and S3 are the “Iron Majors running the organization.” We shared the responsibility to do just that. In practice, this meant consistently communicating on priorities, training readiness, personnel, maintenance, awards, evaluations, security clearances, etc. Either one of us could step in each other’s shoes to keep the battalion running.

This consistent communication paid dividends when the battalion received several unique missions to be manned, trained, and executed within extremely short time periods. With a collaborative relationship, we could easily shift tasks between us to ensure mission accomplishment without worrying about the traditional roles of an S3 and XO. This relationship was especially valuable when Dave’s family experienced an unexpected death that required him to take emergency leave. Ryan also experienced numerous challenges after his wife was selected for an aide-de-camp job. This required him to leverage Dave’s flexibility to manage the battalion staff when he needed to address urgent family situations. In both cases, we communicated daily on our vital missions, surging across our regular roles to ensure mission accomplishment, the well-being of our Soldiers, and our own mental, physical, and emotional health.

Conclusion: The S3/XO relationship as a force multiplier

At its essence, the term force multiplier pays homage to another ubiquitous aphorism – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This is certainly true as it pertains to the S3/XO relationship. We were able to use our professional relationship to fight for resources, train our personnel, and present ready units to the joint force, all while maintaining a focus on the health and welfare of our people. We certainly did not get everything right; however, we were able to accomplish quite a bit for our battalion, brigade, service component command, and our Soldiers – by working side by side. This success was rooted in our professional relationship – a positive relationship built on a genuine understanding and appreciation for the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of each other.

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