



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

Developing a Great Commander/ First Sergeant Relationship

A great commander/first sergeant (CDR/1SG) relationship is make or break when it comes to being an effective unit. Some of us are graced by God (seriously!) with that nail-eating, rust-crapping 1SG who lives and breathes excellence. Others of us are not so lucky. To be fair, these expectations go both ways, right?

Great relationships don't just happen. A lot goes into making a relationship work. This month, we want to tap into our collective experience and capture practical things we've done to foster a great CDR/1SG relationship. So, we ask: What is one thing that has worked for you when it comes to developing and fostering a great CDR/1SG relationship?

Mike Eliassen

C & HHC/1-506 IN, 4/101

Simply put: PT, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Before we deployed, my 1SG and I ate breakfast and lunch together often. Most days we did PT together. And we always left the office together. While deployed, it was the same thing. The Soldiers see this. They see us together, and they see us working through issues that come up in the company. To be of one mind is to be inseparable. This is what we tried to achieve through long hours working toward a common goal. What has made things easier is a common belief system—morally, ethically and on things Army. We've agreed to disagree on things in private, hammering out the details to present a front that both of us can live with. We both often joke that it is much like our marriages and how we deal with our children—keep a united front, or the buggers will wear you down.

Brian Waters

C Co., 62nd Engineer Combat Battalion

I got a new 1SG just weeks after taking command. As much as I hate the idea of "lanes," I think that it contributed greatly to starting off on a good foot. We sat down for his initial counseling, which was really just a two-way discussion, and I let him tell me what he thought his role was. I used that as the starting point. While I've certainly got an opinion on everything, I kept my mouth shut on anything in his lane while it was in progress. By allowing him space, I found him coming to me to discuss those matters more and more, and I would do likewise. After about four months, there was a feeling that we could bring up anything to each other without issue. I think the key was empowering him by letting him establish himself on certain issues, and doing the same myself.

Once we deployed, I would echo what Mike said about

eating together. We would do PT and eat all meals together when we weren't out on mission. Halfway through the deployment, I had a change of 1SGs and kept up the same habits. Being deployed, it all comes down to effective communication—discussing certain matters in private and getting on the same page to present a united front.

John Hollein

HHD, 61st Multifunctional Medical Battalion

I'd like to revise "great relationships don't just happen" to "a functional relationship doesn't just happen." Many a CDR has had to put in double the work just to keep things civil with his 1SG. Regardless of how good (or bad) the personal relationship is, understanding and enforcing your professional responsibilities has to be the cornerstone upon which the foundation is laid. The thing that has worked best for me is knowing that if the 1SG does anything illegal, unethical, immoral or unsafe, the CDR is the only person in the company with the authority to rein him in. The CDR is the only one who counsels, rates and recommends the next three positions for the 1SG. That authority is the CDR's alone. So exercise it! This is something I wish I had had the courage to do sooner. Our 1SGs deserve to have honest feedback on their job performance, just as we do.

Christopher Combest

A Co., 949 Gun Truck Security

Each relationship is different. Personalities, hobbies, interests, etc., vary from person to person. I do not personally spend every waking hour with Top. We do, however, work together on every aspect of command, keeping each other informed of issues and decisions made. For me, it is a partnership, a marriage of sorts. The fact that our Troop-

1SG Royce Harris and CPT Chris Combest promote Brendaly Cruz (center) to 1LT at the Company A, 949 Gun Truck HQ in Al Taji, Iraq. 1LT Cruz, the 4th Platoon Leader, runs convoy security missions throughout Baghdad.



LTC Pete Kilner

ers see us together in the proverbial unified front gives them a sense of stability and a happy home, so to speak. My “First Shirt” and I may differ on angles and courses of action from time to time, but when it comes to delivery, we will be on the same page. This is nonnegotiable for us, and it requires occasional compromise. Communication is key in this relationship—especially in a combat zone.

Jeff Sargent
B/501 MI, 2/1 AD

All the things mentioned are excellent, and I’ll add something often not considered by junior officers—LISTENING. Many new commanders come in full of energy and want to run 100 mph, which isn’t bad, but keep in mind your senior NCO has most likely seen and done it before. My 1SG and I shared a hooch during deployment, so we spent a majority of our time together, which definitely kept things running smoothly. Take an interest in his personal goals and his family. Never talk smack on your 1SG to your other officers, no matter what! One of our primary jobs as a commander is to train our lieutenants. The example we set with our CDR/1SG relationship will be the basis for how our lieutenants handle the same thing themselves while commanding. It also sets the example for them in their relationships with their PSGs.

Raul Rovira
HHC, U.S. Army Garrison Livorno

Café and cigars. Just like in a marriage, a little quiet time and communication go a long way. My first 1SG and I would always have café at the Italian bar at Darby (at 0830 and 1500). Those 15 to 20 minutes were so valuable. We’d go over work, family, personal plans and professional plans and even talk about camping with the Boy Scouts. Café time was always a special time for the 1SG and me. My second 1SG was more of the cigarette type. I occasionally smoke cigars, so I got a few small cigars. At least one to three times a week, we would have a smoke session. Just like with my other 1SG, we would talk about work, family and so on. The centerpiece of all this was communicating. Café and cigars were just things that help set the stage.

Ted Stokes
A & HHT 6-9 CAV

I add a caveat to my comments with the statement that in all of my 22 months of command I was blessed with amazing 1SGs. Not until I had a chance to look back did I understand

how lucky I was to have the opportunity to work with such amazing professionals.

In my opinion, the most imperative requirement for a CDR/1SG relationship is a brutally honest understanding that everything that is decided, planned, executed or resourced is done for the good of the unit and its Soldiers. This common-ground agreement sets the bar for the relationship between the CDR and the 1SG and ultimately facilitates the success of the command-team relationship. In “the good of the unit and its Soldiers,” I include all aspects of the unit’s mission, training, administration and equipment, as well as the care of Soldiers’ families.

There are times when you and your 1SG will disagree on an issue. However, as in all military organizations, decisions must be made, and the CDR is the individual charged with this responsibility. 1SGs are professionals and understand this concept, and as long as their guidance, recommendations and experience were considered in the decision-making process, they will typically support your decision and expend every ounce of energy to execute your intent.

Chris Brautigam
D/2-16 IN & HHC 4/1 ID

In both of my companies, I made my relationship with my 1SG my number-one priority, ensuring that he and I had the same vision for the company. Once we saw where we were going, we talked about how we were going to get there and the lanes we would work in. We also talked about the company XO and how we would utilize him. Our basic output from this was that the 1SG ran the company so that I could command it.

During my first command, which I took in combat, my 1SG and I sat down and talked every day. It usually started with events surrounding the company (our current missions, upcoming missions and so on) and then would usually turn into a BS session. The other things we discussed were our per-



The working relationship of CPT Chris Brautigam (left) and his 1SG in D/2-16 IN, William C. Zappa, became a model for junior officers, NCOs and soldiers at Forward Operating Base Rustamiyah in Baghdad.

sonal strengths and weaknesses. This allowed us to complement each other's talents and, when necessary, to cover for the other's areas of weakness. After six months in this command, we operated seamlessly and anticipated each other's decisions, actions and questions. All told, I've been blessed with two great NCOs who tirelessly supported my commands and took as much ownership of the success of the company as I did. At the end of the day, I think that our relationships—both personal and professional—were examples for my PLs and PSGs to follow, as well as a great outward sign of unity for the junior NCOs and Soldiers to see.

Ryan Morgan

C & HHC/2-502 IN, 2/101 AASLT

I think that Chris has the right idea about the relationship when he said that the 1SG runs the company so he can command it. The CDR/1SG relationship is the critical one in the battalion. I can remember having some very different points of view on quite a few issues with my first 1SG. Sometimes we would go with his idea, sometimes with mine. This was important to both of us. He told me that one of the best things I could do for my PLs (and he for his PSGs) was to show them that our relationship was strong and united. Fortunately, my 1SG and I got along very well and agreed on the majority of issues. He was a new 1SG when I took command, and we grew into the roles together. Probably the best lesson he taught me was how to cultivate a positive relationship with the battalion CSM, which went on to pay huge dividends.

little doubt that the company will succeed.

Jeremy Banta

1485th TC, OHARNQ

When we deployed, both my 1SG and I had less than one year in our positions. We had a good working relationship prior to deployment, but we needed to discuss how we were going to operate once we got to the MOB site. I had already performed an initial counseling when she was hired. Most importantly at that time, I explained that NCO business was hers, officer business was mine. If she needed input, advice or my blessing on NCO issues, she



CPT Ryan Morgan (right) and 1SG Charles Judd (center) decorate their company area for the holidays in Iraq. 1SG Judd is currently the command sergeant major of the 1st Bn, 506th Infantry Regiment, in Afghanistan.

LTC Pete Kilner

CPT Kathleen Sprinkle (center); her first sergeant, 1SG Richard Langston; and her lieutenants, (left to right) 1LT Scott Chandler, 2LT Juan Carlos Tabora and 1LT Ben Kartchner, enjoy a brigade dining-out.



LTC Pete Kilner

was to seek it. I did the same for officer business if it might affect the NCOs. It gave her the autonomy to lead her NCOs and me to lead my officers. If I had an issue that was NCO business (for example, a Soldier out of uniform), I told her to address it rather than make the correction myself. If she had an issue with one of my officers, she did the same. This formed an excellent basis for our deployment.

Michael Konczey
A/3-8 CAV, 1 CD

For me, the key was threefold. The first was an early and thorough initial counseling with my 1SG. In that initial counseling, I laid out how I viewed our relationship and what my expectations were of him. It was great because it set the tone early. He also told me that despite having been a 1SG for 11 months prior to my taking command, it was the first time anyone had counseled him as a 1SG. The second part was setting goals together as a command team and reevaluating them periodically. The third part was maintaining open communication with each other and truly being a command team. The conditions and challenges you face as a command team change dramatically throughout your command tenure, but maintaining open and honest communications with your 1SG is essential to maintaining your sanity and completing your many diverse missions.

Fran Murphy
D/2-34 AR

For me, a dynamic CDR/1SG relationship started on day one. I published a Company Vision (that tied into my Leadership Philosophy) and gave 1SG an initial counseling that focused on my expectations of him. The counseling session rapidly became a conversation and a beneficial exchange of ideas. He told me that he was impressed that I took time to prepare and talk about an initial counseling with him. Afterward, we reprinted the Vision, signed both of our names to it and framed it outside the door to our company. I knew immediately that 1SG and I were on the same azimuth and prepared to succeed.

Kathleen Sprinkle
258th EN Co.

I took command after returning from Theater. My 1SG joined the unit shortly after that. As others have stated, the key was being together. We brought back the basics, including battle buddies, and that's what we were for each

other. We never disagreed in front of others, and I sought his advice in all areas. He is a strong NCO, and I learned a great deal from him after our three years of command together. He, in turn, would be there for me, no matter what. I remember once being summoned to the battalion CDR's office. I told him I had to report, and he grabbed his hat. I told him he didn't have to go, but he said, "Ma'am, we get the praise together and we get the butt chewings together."

Through the CC forum, company commanders are connecting in conversation with each other and becoming more effective leaders as a result. If you are one of 10,000 CC forum members, please log on to <http://cc.army.mil> and join the conversation. If you are not a currently commissioned Army officer and wish to contribute to the conversation, send your thoughts to peter.kilner@us.army.mil, and we'll post them for you.

