CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams

To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

How We Develop Professional Expertise

As company commanders, we are "on point" for the profession of arms. We lead the combat formations that, as the saying goes, execute the final 400 meters of national security policy. This entails enormous responsibility—to the American people, who trust us to keep them safe and secure, and to our Soldiers and their families, who entrust to us their very lives and loved ones. Those we serve expect us to be experts in the ethical application of land combat power so that we can accomplish our missions at the least human cost. But how do we become experts in the profession of arms? How do we learn to command our Soldiers effectively? Listen in to some excerpts from company commanders responding to the question, "How did you get good?"

Christopher Collins
B/309th MI

The three biggest influences on my becoming a good commander were role modeling, developmental experiences and professional reading. When I was enlisted, my first commander made it a priority to come in on the weekend and sign my emergency leave form. I've never forgotten what that meant to me, and I draw on that experience whenever I'm dealing with Soldiers who are in critical or emergency situations. When I was a lieutenant, I worked for three company commanders who were professionals and who assisted in my development for company command. One commander displayed trust in my abilities and recommended me for challenging positions in the company and a later job in HHC [headquarters and headquarters company]. The second commander allowed me, as a platoon leader, to develop and implement plans. He used "outside-the-box" techniques and was a lead-by-example officer. The third commander required me to develop platoon training schedules, which at the time was painful but later helped me develop training schedules as a company commander. Professional reading has also been instrumental to my development. Before I took command, a friend and mentor recommended I read *Taking the Guidon*. I applied certain techniques emphasized in it while in command. Its model for conducting training meetings was especially valuable to my unit's effectiveness.

Richard Moyers
C/2-35 IN & HHC/2-35 IN

Becoming a good commander is the result of a forging process, if you will.

First, the raw materials are the talents that we bring to the table. Our personal attributes such as courage, candor, intuition, likelihood to research, and personal skills bring us to and through precommissioning and commissioning. Then our raw materials are beaten, heated, cooled, and shaped by master crafters and influencers. Previous commanders beat on us to become better during our lieutenant days; peers heat and cool us during the days and nights from precommissioning through staff; the shaping is done by trusted mentors, loved ones/family members, and the backbone of our Army—NCOs. What emerges is the sword of our command. I had a great first platoon sergeant [PSG] when I was a platoon leader [PL]. He was the proverbial old, salty PSG. Near retirement, he seemed larger than life, but he knew and accepted his responsibility to keep me humble yet empower me to make decisions. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. As an executive officer [XO], I struggled and was put under constant "flame" by my commander. He was immensely demanding, tireless in pushing me toward perfection and dedicated to ensuring that I could carry on in case he couldn't. Though this was a painful process, it was ultimately required.

The Captains Career Course was a cooling period. After three years of beating and heat, being allowed to cool while exchanging peer experiences, learning new doctrinal tools and preparing for staff was incredibly valuable. It was also a great time to reflect upon those things I'd experienced as a lieutenant.

Then came the crucible of staff. Staff time was important because it is when I learned about the forest, not just the trees.

Once in command, my learning didn't stop. During my

CPT Richard Moyers: "Becoming a good commander is the result of a forging process" in which individual talents are the raw materials that are "beaten, heated, cooled, and shaped by master crafters and influencers."

first command, my three greatest influences were my wife (then-girlfriend), my 1SG (who had been one of my Ranger instructors when I was a young 2LT) and my S-3. Sounding boards, each of them helped me to see things like family issues, single-Soldier issues, discipline issues, and how our company affected those to the left and right of us.

Patrick McCarthy
A/9th PSYOP BN (ABN)

I try never to think that I am "good." Instead, I like to think that I am getting better each day at what I do. Way back "in the day," I was introduced to the Principles of Leadership, and the first bullet point, "Know yourself and seek self-improvement" resonated with me. Inspired by that principle, I adopted a "lifelong learning approach" that has served me well. I have strived to be a well-informed, positive leader who continues to learn, keeps faith with my Soldiers, tolerates well-intentioned mistakes and is honest.

I've always tried to be a well-informed officer—abreast of developing news situations, well-read in doctrine and a conversationalist with like-minded contemporaries. I found that by surrounding myself with professionals, I was more likely to become a well-rounded leader with a kit bag full of trusted experience. I also had a sounding board for ideas and concepts. Positive attitude: I adopted a glass-half-full perspective, choosing to be an optimist and to maintain a can-do attitude. I believe that people adopt the personality of their leader and that a positive leader creates a positive, more effective unit. Continuous learning: I record everything that works well and that does not work well. This system has proved invaluable to me, from my days as a fire-team leader to now as a company commander. Unfortunately for my wife, I have volumes of green memorandum books marked "Leadership Lessons and Observations" that make no sense to anyone else but myself. I read a lot and try to apply what has been written to my current challenges. Faith: I put my faith, trust and confidence in my subordinates. I empowered NCOs to conduct day-to-day business, and I beat into my lieutenants' heads to think and plan. I cultivated relationships with my first sergeants. I always kept my ears open and was willing to adopt subordinates' recommendations.

Tolerance: I would not be effective as a leader, let alone a company commander, had my previous leaders not underwritten my mistakes as learning experiences. I have carried that philosophy with me and continue to pay it forward. I do have some "big rocks" that I won't compromise on, but on almost everything else, I can work with and continue to shape, mold, and develop those who are worth investment. Honesty: I like to think that I am honest with myself, my peers and those I lead. I encourage candid comments and don't take them personally in front of Soldiers. I do want their feedback, and I want to improve every day. I like to think that as long as I keep doing these things, perhaps one day I will be "good" and continue to have an impact on the great profession that we are serving.

Jeff O'Dell
F/2-10 AV (Pathfinder)

I was raised on a farm. Working on a farm, you learn that things sometimes go wrong and that whining about a problem doesn't solve it, so you might as well work to find a practical solution and keep moving forward. I remember once, when I was a 14-year-old, the manure spreader that I was operating jammed up. I went and told my grandfather. He turned to me and replied matter-of-factly, "Well, scrape off the manure, see what's wrong and get it working again." Just like that. So I went out and did what needed to be done. Time and again in my career, I've faced situations that just stunk (though not so literally), whether it was an unexpected boulder on our helicopter landing zone or the sudden loss of a key leader. Understanding that dwelling on misfortune doesn't solve the problem, I knew that it was my job as a leader to focus my Soldiers on what needed to be done, not on what had happened. I think that this practical, solutions-focused approach helped my unit overcome some very difficult situations.

Another important experience for me was Ranger School. Yes, I learned some important tactical skills—how to set in an ambush, troop-learning procedures, etc. But the most important skills I developed there were intangible, interpersonal ones. I learned how to influence exhausted, hungry Soldiers to continue marching mile after mile, to stay awake on an ambush line, to do all the things required to accomplish the mission and to take pride in themselves. In short, I learned that leadership in difficult situations is all about relating to people effectively.

When I was appointed my battalion's scout platoon leader

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in Iraq, the commander gave me the mission to take down the enemy's IED [improvised explosive device] cells operating in our area of operations [AO]. My battalion was "eating" an IED a day, and a lot of guys were earning Purple Hearts. I did what I knew how to do. I laid out the problem, made some assumptions, and began collecting data on where and when the IEDs were detonating. Within a few weeks, I had enough data to identify patterns and to create a template for the time and location of a likely IED emplacement. We set in a sniper kill team, and sure enough, the bad guys showed up. A sniper rifle and a SAW [squad automatic weapon] put an end to four of them that night.

Immediately, the rate of IEDs in our AO decreased from one a day to one a week. Soon, we successfully targeted another location and took out another IED team, and our IED problem was solved. A few years later, when I was a commander, I noticed that the lieutenants who were the best problem solvers were folks who had majored in engineering in college. This helped me realize that my own degree in Aeronautical Engineering was serving me well. Engineering is all about problem solving; so is leadership.

Darrell Fawley
C/1-23 IN

I don't know that there is a clear answer to the question of when I became a good platoon leader. Even as a current company commander, I am still learning about how to lead a platoon. It's a continuous journey.

I graduated Ranger School and thought, "I'm really good at OPORDs [operational orders] and tactics. I'm going to be a great PL!" Then I arrived at my first unit and got hit with a whole bunch of discipline issues. We fixed them, and I started noticing myself making decisions and I thought, "Wow, I'm making decisions without over-thinking. I'm doing pretty well." Then we started going to the range, and I realized that I still had much to learn.

U.S. Army/John Helms

CPT Darrell Fawley: "I don't know that there is a clear answer … Even as a current company commander, I am still learning about how to lead a platoon. It's a continuous journey."

Later on, we started doing good PT [physical training], and Soldiers were motivated. The commander and I were in sync, and everything was pointing to us being the company's best platoon. I thought, "We're the best, and that means I'm the best." Then we deployed and came across a lot of unexpected terrain and a tough enemy situation, and I realized I was still immature and learning. The platoon started getting better on the ground through experience, and we refined our systems. We got to a point where we could execute any mission without too much hassle. We had systems in place that were airtight, and everyone in the platoon brought ideas on how to conduct our outpost defense better, patrol better, train better, etc. I thought, "This is it. We've arrived, and I really know what I'm doing."

About that time, I took over an antiarmor platoon and realized that I knew very little about its tactics or equipment. But, I thought, "I'm a great platoon leader and can whip this platoon into shape." Over the next 10 months, I did more learning than teaching and saw tactics and techniques that we hadn't used in my rifle platoon. However, after a while the platoon could search a house in the middle of the night without waking up the inhabitants and set up on the rooftop to conduct an OP [observation post], or navigate through the farm fields and set up an ambush with ease. I believed that we were the company's best platoon, and I thought that I was finally where I needed to be as a lieutenant.

At the end of the deployment, I thought I had learned all I needed to learn about being a PL, so I went to MCCC [Maneuver Captains Career Course] as a 1LT and then was assigned to be an IBOLC (Infantry Basic Officer Leadership Course] platoon trainer. Every cycle I went through, I learned as I taught. At the end of every class, I'd think, "I would be the best platoon leader in a battalion now." I left IBOLC thinking there was no more to learn about being a PL. Then I worked in the Brigade S-3 shop for six weeks and talked with other former rifle platoon leaders, and they taught me so much more. Now I'm in command, and I am still learning about being a good PL.

For me, mentorship, training and reading all set the base, but "becoming good" is a continued learning process that will never be over. There is always more to learn about orders, weapons employment, training, fitness and a multitude of other things.

Frank Slavin III
HHT/4-9 CAV

As cringeworthy as it sounds, before taking command I spent a lot of time on staff. I eventually took command while in combat. Luckily, I had had five months as the squadron's battle captain to observe and understand the squadron's battlespace in Baghdad. Once I had a guidon in hand, and for the next three years over two commands, I relied on my 1SGs, PSGs and other subordinates to make our troop function well. My 1SGs and I talked daily—almost all day, sometimes—about what was going on in the troop, what things we/I could do better, what was on the right track and how we should capture it for later use. Three of my four 1SGs and I had an awesome battle-buddy command relationship, which proved to be invaluable when things hit the fan. I mentored my XOs to do my job. In fact, my last XO was so squared away with the daily business of the troop that I probably could have commanded from my living room during the final four months I was in command.

I was also blessed to have some of the best S-3s, XOs, operations SGMs and commanders to look up to. Every one of these men would take time to talk me through what they saw as success at the troop level, both before and after I took command. Without some outstanding mentors taking an active role in teaching me, I think I would have had a much harder time.

I never considered myself to be so good that I could kick back and relax; I looked forward to each day as a new learning experience. There was always a situation when talking with peers, subordinates or superiors when the lightbulb would come on and I would have an "ah-ha" moment, thus increasing my already bursting kit bag.

Steven Delvaux
A/2-187 IN

We're all products of our experiences, and *everything* factors into making us who we are and helping us become more effective as leaders and commanders.

CPT Frank Slavin: "I never considered myself to be so good that I could kick back and relax; I looked forward to each day as a new learning experience."

MAJ Steven Delvaux (right): "We are all products of our experiences, and everything *factors into making us who we are and helping us become effective as leaders and commanders."*

I had a loving and supportive wife and family. I had a great relationship with God that imbued me with love, patience, humility, wisdom and understanding for my Soldiers. I had great friends and fellow commanders whom I could vet with. I had a great battalion commander who taught me. I learned a ton of lessons while I was a platoon leader and XO, and I kept my eyes and ears open. I had an awesome company commander when I was a PL who taught me by his personal example. I carpooled and had lunch with Tony Burgess every day at the Captains Career Course, and we shared our experiences and talked a lot about the great (and not so great) company commanders we had as PLs. I was open to accepting that my way wasn't the only way, nor was it always the best way. I had absolutely superior PLs who did the lion's share of the lifting on all the heavy work. I listened. I cared. I always gave 100 percent. I tried always to lead from the front and share all my Soldiers' privations. I had great 1SGs, great NCOs and great Soldiers. I was willing to sacrifice. I tried always to be selfless. I loved the unit and my Soldiers, and I really, really, really believed in our mission. I stressed the importance of teamwork. I paid attention to the little stuff—maintenance, supply, etc.—the devil is always in the details. I owned it—took responsibility for everything my unit failed to do and always tried to defer the praise to my Soldiers when I got credit for doing something good. You know, it all just kind of came together.

Everything that we do counts. No man can survive in a vacuum, and no man is an island. We're all products of our experiences, and if we're paying attention, holding ourselves accountable, working as a team, emulating the Warrior Ethos and Army Values, leading in accordance with the Leadership Dimensions outlined in FM 6-22 [*Army Leadership*], and trying to get better every day, then we will survive and be effective company commanders. I firmly believe it.

It seems pretty clear that we take responsibility for our own learning while recognizing that much of that learning occurs through interactions with our fellow professionals—mentors, peers and subordinates—in both formal and informal settings. If you are a currently commissioned officer who cares passionately about company-level leadership, we invite you to learn with your fellow professionals of arms at http://CC.army.mil.