



# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

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## How Trust Is Earned or Lost

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Trust is the motor oil in the engine of leadership. With it, units operate smoothly and efficiently. If it breaks down, the resulting friction causes operations to become inefficient and eventually fail. To achieve our potential as commanders, we have to be trusted by our subordinates, peers and leaders.

To gain insight into how trust is earned or lost, the CompanyCommand team asked company-level officers to share their experiences of gaining or losing trust in their own commanders. All shared their stories while they were deployed to Afghanistan. From their independent and unscripted anecdotes, themes seem to emerge. Our willingness to trust our commanders appears to be a function of their truthfulness, competence, supportiveness, respect, empathy, authenticity and trust in us. It's reasonable to conclude that our Soldiers' trust in us is determined by those same factors. This month, we share with you true stories of how trust is earned or lost in our profession. Each bulleted paragraph represents the testimony of an individual Army captain or lieutenant.

### Commanders Who Inspire Trust

■ One of my peers was killed by an IED while our CO was in his convoy. The CO handled the situation calmly and was able to get the situation under control quickly. He had a medevac on the ground within 20 minutes, and he kept everyone out until the site was secured and all remains were recovered. After the incident, he was honest and up front in telling me the mistakes that he and my peer made that night.

■ We had a critical part break on our satellite trailer terminal. It was probably the only part we didn't have a spare of. My commander told me that he would track down the part we needed and get it to us ASAP. I wasn't expecting to see the part anytime soon, but one to two days later it showed up on a Black Hawk at our FOB. My commander went above and beyond to find and deliver the needed part.

■ My task force commander was trying to decide whether to enforce a standard put out by the FOB commander that everyone else thought was a bad idea. The FOB commander had put out a policy that Soldiers must have their ACU blouses on at all times. Rather than conforming to this stupid policy or blatantly disregarding it, my commander brought all the command teams together and, leveraging the knowl-

edge and expertise of his subordinate commanders, he proposed a change of policy to the FOB commander. He put his trust in us that we would enforce the policy he proposed. In doing so, he demonstrated that he cares about his Soldiers' well-being, that he cares about how this task force is viewed by the FOB commander and that he trusts his subordinates to enforce a policy that has a lot of grey area.

*"Trust stands out as the defining element that enabled our military to overcome adversity and endure the demands of extended combat. ... Internal trust is integral to the chain of command. It is both inherent in and demanded amongst peers, between seniors and subordinates."*

—GEN Martin E. Dempsey  
ADRP 1: The Army Profession

■ During a brigade-level COA development and decision, I needed the support of my BN CDR in order to receive my company's desired COA for the accomplishment of the overall intelligence mission. His understanding of the information I conveyed allowed him to speak on the company's behalf to the BDE CDR. I trusted that he would inform me of further actions and that he would hold true to the best interests of the BDE and my Soldiers. My BN CDR is always true to his word, and he develops me as a leader through open and honest discussion. I can always trust that he will take a COA to the BDE CDR and fight for my company because he gives me honest feedback—both positive and negative—during the COA's development. I never question his competence or support. When he says he will do something, he does it.

■ The BN CDR was very supportive when I lost two Soldiers. When we talked, I could see the event affected him as much as it did any member of my troop. He was open and honest in discussions and gave me good advice—advice, not orders or directives—on how to approach the situation. He also engaged members of the troop because he was genuinely concerned for their emotional well-being. His actions allowed me to see a new side of his personality.

Commanders gain trust by maintaining open lines of communication with their subordinates. Here, CPT Jeff Noll (right) receives a backbrief during a 2007 patrol in Baghdad from one of his platoon leaders, 1LT Charlie Parsons.



■ The CO had my platoon doing very long, strenuous missions. Realizing the hard work being done, he sent for an MP unit to pull my platoon's force-protection mission for a while. By taking action to help us out, he showed me that he understood and was concerned about my platoon.

*Taking care of people and maximizing their performance ... have a great impact on [Soldiers'] motivation and the trust they feel for their team and their leaders.*

—Field Manual (FM) 6-22 Army Leadership

■ One of my air crews entered into Pakistani airspace in order to provide support for a ground unit in contact with insurgents. It would have been easy for my boss to “throw them under the bus,” so to speak. Instead, he remained fair and impartial while expressing his concerns. While I would have preferred even more support, I understood his position and concerns.

■ Two local nationals [Afghans] were assaulted—presumably by U.S. Soldiers—on the camp at which I served as mayor. I was unsure how my BN CDR would handle the situation. He spoke with me directly and told me of his frustrations with the situation. He assured me that all assets would be available during my investigation and that he would sup-

port me. This increased my level of trust in him.

■ My company commander allows my platoon to operate as autonomously as possible and within reason. He trusts but verifies that we are conducting patrols to standard and performing our checks of our Soldiers. He does a great job of leading by example and frequently conducts patrols with my platoon, but we forget he is there because he does not interfere. He is very supportive but keeps a “hands-off” approach. If we are engaged by the enemy, he doesn't force himself into the situation; he simply lets me know he is there if we need him.

*Empowering subordinates is a forceful statement of trust and one of the best ways of developing them as leaders. It is important to point out that being empowered also implies accepting the responsibility for the freedom to act and create.*

—FM 6-22 Army Leadership

### CompanyCommand Glossary

**ACU**- Army combat uniform  
**ADRP**- Army doctrinal reference publication  
**ANA**- Afghan National Army  
**ANP**- Afghan National Police  
**AR**- Army regulation  
**BDE**- brigade  
**BN**- battalion  
**CDR**- commander  
**CO**- commanding officer  
**COA**- course of action  
**CONOP**- concept of the operation plan  
**CROWS**- Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station

**exfil**- exfiltration (movement away from a patrol's objective)  
**FOB**- forward operating base  
**IED**- improvised explosive device  
**MP**- military police  
**OER**- officer evaluation report  
**OPORD**- operations order  
**S-3**- operations officer  
**TTPs**- tactics, techniques and procedures  
**UCMJ**- Uniform Code of Military Justice  
**wadi**- Arabic term for “valley,” used to describe dry riverbed  
**XO**- executive officer



*Professional competence is important to earning the trust of senior leaders and subordinates. Here, 2LT Michael Kane leads his platoon on a mounted combat patrol in Afghanistan.*

■ My CO's actions while I was planning and executing a platoon air assault positively affected my level of trust for him. He allowed me time to plan and gave me honest feedback. He also helped solve a couple of problems I asked for help on without seeming judgmental that I was asking for help.

■ I had two occasions when Soldiers were being considered for UCMJ action. My commander sat down with me for at least an hour each time and discussed the cases. She debated them from all viewpoints and even played devil's advocate at times to ensure we were making the right decisions. In the end, she went with my recommendations.

■ While my company commander was on leave, I was the acting commander for three weeks. His preparation for leave included preparing me to take over for him. Upon his return, he went to the BN leadership with good things to say about my performance, and he backed up any changes I made to the company. His trust in me reinforced my trust in him. I also learned many issues that he has to deal with every day that he shields the company from. This helped me realize how much he cares about us.

*Unethical behavior quickly destroys organizational morale and cohesion—it undermines the trust and confidence essential to teamwork and mission accomplishment. Consistently doing the right thing forges strong character in individuals and expands to create a culture of trust throughout the organization.*

—FM 6-22 Army Leadership

### **Commanders Who Forfeit Trust**

■ My past commander here in Afghanistan lied to my supervisor about his next assignment in the brigade. Everyone (except my supervisor) knew that he was lying. The lack of honesty he demonstrated severely hurt the level of trust I had in him as a leader.

■ When I was conducting an AR 15-6 investigation, my

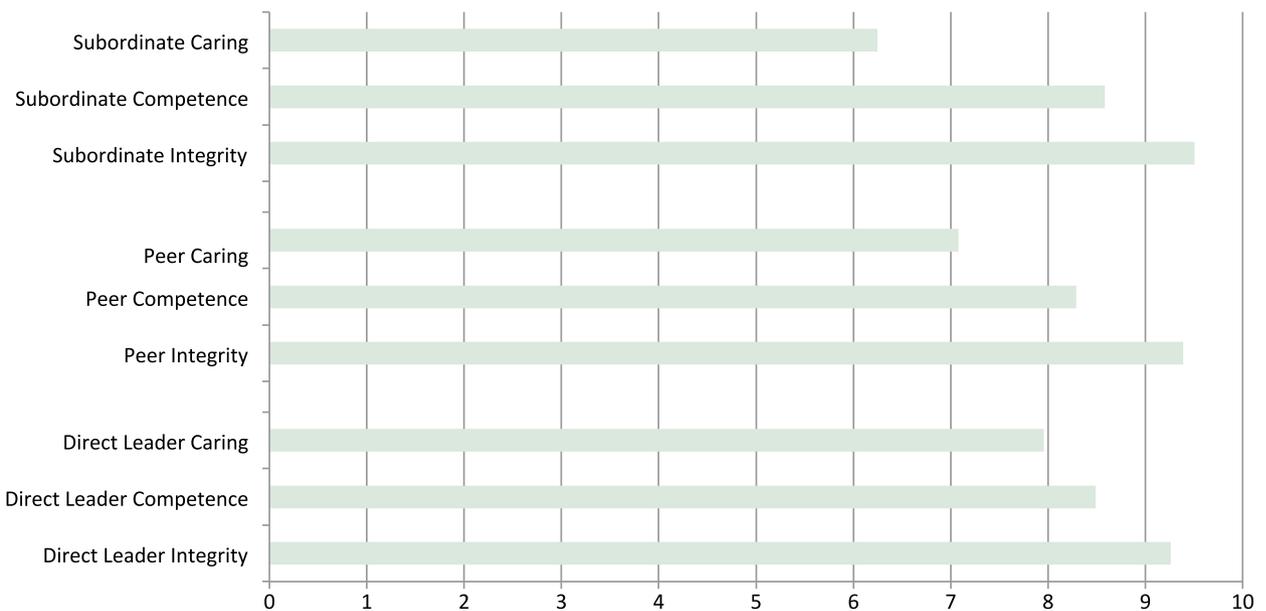
“protecting” the Soldier I had been coerced to find negligent.

■ As a company commander, I was tasked to provide a platoon to an out-of-sector mission. The BN CDR did not contact me; the S-3 did. He told us vaguely what we would be doing. We had only six hours before movement. I was given no products to reference, no OPORD and no details. I was told to call BDE and the out-of-sector unit myself. I contacted the BDE and received a written OPORD and Power-Point CONOP. I gave these products to the platoon I was sending. They obviously did not think that the “1/3, 2/3 rule” had been adhered to, since they were left with so little time to prepare. The platoon left for the mission after a few hours of rest. They performed miserably; they were in contact every day of the 72-hour mission, at one point expending all of their Mk 19 ammo. While the platoon did not sustain any casualties, they felt abandoned and blamed me for sending them on a charade. I get frustrated when I have to defend my leadership's bad leadership. I also don't like being the



*Genuine concern for each other increases trust up and down the chain of command. When CPT Rich Chudzik (left), who had been wounded early in a deployment and was recovering in the United States, was awarded the Purple Heart, his former platoon sergeant, SFC William Tomlin, attended the event during leave. CPT Chudzik's battalion commander, LTC Brian Mennes (not shown), took time out of his own leave to present the medal.*

## Conditions for Trust: Down, Across and Up



More than 100 company-grade officers in Afghanistan were asked, “In order for you to be able to trust a fellow Soldier, how important are each of the following:”

- How much they care about you as a person (caring)
- Their professional competence (competence)
- Their truthfulness and reliability to do what they say they will do (integrity)

On a scale of zero to 10, where zero equals not at all important and 10 equals absolutely essential, indicate how important each condition is to your willingness to trust a subordinate, a peer and your direct superior or leader.

*This framework for trust in organizations is based on research by COL Patrick Sweeney, USA Ret.*

The results indicate that trust requires high levels of caring, competence and integrity. Integrity is the most important condition for trusting a subordinate, peer and leader. The highest and lowest values in the survey were assigned to our relationships with subordinates. We require the highest level of integrity from them, but we care little about their concern for us as people. As one commander put it: “I can train subordinates to become more competent; that’s on me. And while it’s nice if they care about me, it’s not essential. What’s absolutely essential is that they are 100 percent honest with me 100 percent of the time. I base my decisions on their words and reports.”

brunt of the platoon’s anger for something out of my control. I also don’t like sending them on a dangerous mission without time to plan and prepare. This really caused me to lose faith in my leadership; it revealed their degree of care and concern for my Soldiers or lack thereof.

■ I [was reprimanded] for having a platoon of tired Soldiers and saying so. I knew the leader in question was also tired, but even so, I felt that his behavior was a large breach of our trust. It certainly damaged our professional relationship. I became reluctant to tell him of issues caused by command decisions.

■ I had a BN CDR who routinely did not know the names of his primary staff. He would mistake people for others and assign tasks meant for another person. This was understandable during his first month on the job, but not after working together for six months. It just made everyone on the staff feel that the BN CDR had no concern for them as people.

■ The CO pushed my platoon deep into a *wadi* channel to investigate an intelligence report about a possible insur-

gent gathering. In doing so, he contradicted his own policy about sending platoons into that *wadi* system. Four months earlier, 1st Platoon hit an IED there and lost an NCO. After

*Teamwork is based on commitment to the group, which in turn is built on trust. Trust is based on expecting that others will act for the team and keep its interests ahead of their own.*

—FM 6-22 Army Leadership

that, the CO established a two-platoon requirement—plus air assets—for operating in that system. Now he was violating his own policy. I argued with him about it, stressing the risk of an IED and ambush during exfil from the *wadi*. Ultimately we pushed down that *wadi*, but I had the ANA and ANP lead our convoy on the exfil. This incident negatively impacted my trust in the CO. I interpret the situation this way: He wanted us to give him something exciting to report,



Commanders gain trust by acting with integrity and providing clear guidance to their subordinates. Here, CPT Jerry Wood explains his intent for an upcoming mission to his troop executive officer, 1LT Joshua Kinsel.

regardless of potential casualties, just so he would have an OER bullet.

- An insurgent rocket took out the only CROWS truck at a remote outpost staffed by one of my platoons. I was dependent on my BN CDR for help getting a replacement CROWS to that platoon. The BN CDR knew that insurgents tended to attack my Soldiers' district center when the CROWS was down, but he did not provide a convoy to replace the CROWS truck for a week! The delay forced my Soldiers to patrol out to the district center without the support provided by a CROWS truck. I interpreted that action to indicate that when the BN CDR routinely harasses my XO and me about equipment readiness, he's doing it not for the sake of my Soldiers but rather for his own OER.

- Recently, my company had a rash of discipline issues. Every time I tried to brief my BN CDR on my plan of action for dealing with a serious incident, he interrupted me and told me what to do. Every time, it was what my plan of action had entailed. He doesn't listen to me or trust my judgment.

- After the Taliban killed a local national, my CO tried to throw my platoon under the bus and displace all blame to the platoon leader and squad leaders. His actions showed complete disregard for the troops under his command.

- My old company commander punished Soldiers for violating General Order No. 1 (no males and females alone in the same room), yet she herself had males visit her in her quarters, and Soldiers saw this.

- A new BN CDR took over during our deployment. In our task organization, we rarely see him because he is located at Bagram Airfield and really serves only as a support channel. He came to our firing point for battlefield circulation and immediately demanded changes in our TTPs and mission operations without assessing our tactical environment or even allowing me to explain why we conduct operations like this. The fact that I couldn't even finish a sentence with him and that he showed no particular regard for me or my subordinates conveyed to me he has no trust in my abilities as a leader, and it thereby destroyed any trust I may have had in his abilities as a leader.

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"Three rules of thumb" is a way to test whether a proposed action is honorable and thus likely to inspire trust:

1. Does this action attempt to deceive anyone or allow anyone to be deceived?

2. Does this action gain (or allow the gain of) privilege or advantage to which I or someone else would not otherwise be entitled?

3. Would I be satisfied by the outcome if I were on the receiving end of this action?

If you feel that more needs to be said about trust, then this article has achieved its purpose. The CompanyCommand online forum seeks to be a catalyst for conversation (not a proponent of policy), so we hope that you build upon this conversation with your units and fellow leaders. If you are a currently commissioned officer and want to connect with past, present and future company-level commanders, join us online at <http://cc.army.mil>. If you are not eligible for membership in CompanyCommand and want to contribute your ideas on trust, email [cocmd.team@us.army.mil](mailto:cocmd.team@us.army.mil).

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Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?