



# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



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

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## The Best Advice I've Ever Received

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We hear and read a lot of advice about leadership. Some of the words roll past us, some we put into our kit bag, and some strike true and change us as leaders. This month, we share the words that have resonated loudest within each of us—the best, most meaningful advice we've ever received. These pearls of wisdom have en-

abled us to lead more effectively. Seeing them all together in one place, we're reminded of former Army Chief of Staff GEN Creighton W. Abrams Jr.'s dictum: "Soldiers are not *in* the Army. Soldiers *are* the Army." Overwhelmingly, the advice that means the most to us as leaders is advice that guides our relationships with Soldiers.

■ **"Don't overreact, especially to bad news."** You can usually tell when a platoon sergeant or platoon leader is bringing you news of a bad decision, an accident or serious misconduct. If your immediate response is one that talks about the way forward and expresses your continued confidence in them, it immediately affects their view of the situation and will permeate their unit's reaction. You can always escalate your rhetoric or anger later, but it is tough to take words back. A corollary to this is: "An urgent messenger does not require an urgent decision." I see this as especially true with personnel actions. The more the lieutenant's hair is on fire about a sergeant's perceived misconduct, the more likely a careful look at the whole situation is in order. —MAJ Pete Exline

■ **"No one will remember the things that you said. They will remember only how you treated them and made them feel."** Having recently finished commanding a company, I absolutely believe that statement to be true. Some leaders in the Army believe that long-winded speeches in front of mass formations are the epitome of leadership. Regardless of what witty nuggets of wisdom and fancy words are said in front of a formation, I believe that about 95 percent of the Soldiers forget them within a few hours. Soldiers remember leaders by how they are treated by them. An officer or NCO who takes the time to listen and help a Soldier with a need will forever be remembered as a good and caring leader by that Soldier. Treating Soldiers with respect and dignity has 10 times more of an impact than any fancy worded speech. —CPT James Kadel

■ **"Your rank makes you nothing; it is you who make that rank something, so don't let rank go to your head."** In my early days as a platoon leader, I noticed that I was more and more shunned by Soldiers in my platoon. I could never get anyone to tell me why until I asked my company commander what I was doing wrong. He explained that I had

a reputation for arrogance and remaining aloof from the members of the platoon. Until that time, I had no clue whatsoever that I was perceived that way. I thought I was following the Army's requirements for officer-enlisted interaction. I somewhat envisioned myself as SGT Audie Murphy or as a young GEN Maxwell Taylor. I was completely and utterly wrong. It wasn't until I took stock and heard my commanding officer's advice that I began to make inroads and positive change in the platoon. It isn't your rank that people are interested in; they care whether or not you are a person they can



*"You have to know how your people think," advises CPT Timothy Biocic, pictured here as a lieutenant preparing to destroy an enemy cave in Afghanistan.*

Marine Col. C.J. Douglas, left, deployed in Afghanistan, believes leaders should be predictable. “Subordinates should be able to expect that you will react consistently to events,” he says, “rather than react with a level of inconsistency that creates instability within the unit.”



trust—with their lives and their careers. There have been many lieutenants and many captains, some good, some bad. The trick is to be the person that Soldiers associate positively with that rank. I am not anyone special because I am a captain in the Army. I certainly can't order someone else's dog around and hope to have that order followed. The one thing that makes me special is that I know who I am *outside* the Army, and I understand what my rank means *in* the Army. —CPT Allen Toepfer

■ Although not given directly to me, I think the advice given in MG John M. Schofield's 1879 definition of discipline

*Decentralized operations require leaders at all levels that understand their environment, learn quickly, make sound decisions, and lead change.*

—Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22  
*Army Leadership*

is pretty spot on: **“The discipline which makes the soldier of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment.** On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instructions and give commands in such a manner and in such a tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself while one who feels, and hence manifests disrespect towards others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.” —CPT Micah Klein

■ **“You can't change a system from the outside. You have to join it to change it.”** This advice was given to me

by Patrick Vernon, my technology education teacher in 10th grade, when I was eager to improve the social and technical systems of that particular milieu. Eighteen years later, a favorite saying of my battalion commander speaks to my enduring motive: “This is the business of ‘make-[stuff]-better.com.’” In other words, whatever you're doing as a leader, approach it professionally and competitively and make it better than it was. Then move to the next thing. —CPT Paolo Sica

■ **“You can't change the Army, but you can change your piece of it. As you grow and progress up the ranks, your piece gets bigger.”** This advice was given to me in 1986 by my first sergeant. I was a young sergeant and a newly appointed tank commander who was stressed out over some (now long-forgotten) bit of minutia in the field. My first sergeant was a Vietnam veteran, and he spoke those words with a cup of coffee in his hand and a cigarette dangling from his lip. He was right, and I've always tried to make “my piece of the Army” the best it can be. —LTC Mike Cathey

■ **“Be the change you wish to see in your unit.”** This is a simple yet powerful concept. It is easy for Soldiers (leaders included) to join a unit and become part of a group that breeds negativity. People sometimes fail to realize how much negativity can influence and promote more of the same. What if everyone were more positive? Positivity breeds creativity and productivity, and it enhances morale and camaraderie. I see it in my hospital departments every day. If people in your unit don't think that positivity can start with them, convince them that it does. Because *it does*. Every single one of us has a role in the success our unit achieves. From my lowest-ranking private to my colonels—you can be as influential as you choose to be! The term “command climate” has such a deep meaning to me now that I'm actually in the seat. You have a lot of power to influence your unit, whether or not you realize it. Use your power well. —CPT Tiara Walz

■ **“You are not the focal point of your subordinates' lives.”** They don't spend their nights thinking about you, your speeches or your goals. They have wives, kids, girlfriends,





*MAJ Henry Spence enjoys a moment with his daughter on the day he deployed to Afghanistan from Fort Hood, Texas. The advice that helps keep him balanced is to “do your best to make your tiny portion of the Army the best possible.”*

bills and problems. Acknowledge that. Your men are not here to serve you. They’re here to serve your country. You’re here to serve them. Whenever I have gone wrong as a leader in the Army, it is because I forgot that simple truth. I heard this

*Would you rather be thought of as a great leader of an average unit, or as an average leader of a great unit?*

—Anonymous

advice in an article by Nick Palmisciano, “15 Rules to Effectively Lead a Platoon.” —MAJ Dave Gohlich

■ **“Be who you are.”** At the risk of appearing self-congratulatory, I want to relate the best piece of advice I’ve ever given. During a lull in training one day, my driver asked me for one piece of advice I could give him on his career. I thought for a moment and then told him: “Be who you are.” Throughout my time in ROTC, I observed effective leaders and tried to be just like them. It was a disaster every time, so I resolved to be who I am—even if that was very different from the leaders whom I admired. By the time I got to command, I was still tempted to imitate others, but I stuck with my plan. The commander I replaced was a very lively and popular PT stud. I’m bookish and a little dull, and have little interest in what most Soldiers find popular. Nevertheless, I realized that whether or not I could be a Soldier’s buddy was not relevant to my role as a commander. I’m a nerd, and I didn’t hide it. I did, however, look after the interests of the Soldiers and the unit. I stood up for them when they deserved it, and I disciplined them when they deserved that. I respected the NCOs and sought their counsel, but I didn’t fear to overrule them on the few times when it was necessary. (I was ultimately vindicated.) I went the extra mile to improve the quality of my Soldiers’ lives and careers. My Soldiers quickly discovered that while they probably had little desire to spend any free time with me, I was a trustworthy

and dedicated commander. They also discovered that the problems they saw in the other units of the battalion were conspicuously absent in our battery. Ultimately, the fact that I was a nerd wasn’t relevant because I was the best nerd I could be. Soldiers can smell a phony, and being phony is the quickest way to destroy trust and effectiveness. So what did my former driver do with that bit of wisdom? He hit his expiration of time and service and is now studying for the priesthood! —LTC Matthew Ritchie

■ **“Keep it real and be honest and realistic with yourself.”** Nothing is guaranteed and not everyone will become a general officer. Come to work ready to focus on the mission and do your best to make your tiny portion of the Army the best possible. If you do that, everything else will work itself out. This advice has always helped me keep things in perspective. —MAJ Henry Spence



*Taking command of Company B, U.S. Army Medical Department Activity and Martin Army Community Hospital at Fort Benning, Ga., CPT Tiara Walz, left, receives the guidon from LTC Karlotta Richards.*



1LT James Sullivan, right, and his platoon sergeant, SFC Jeffrey D. Walker, are joined by their Afghan army counterparts in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. The advice that means the most to leaders is the advice that guides not only their relationships with their own soldiers but also their encounters with other leaders.



■ The best advice I ever got was painted above the door to my squad bay when I was an Infantry private. As close as I can remember, it stated: **“The enemy has never been killed by a boxing glove, baseball or football; it has always been the task of an accomplished and skilled marksman.”** I now view that statement through the lens of a combined-arms/joint team context and apply it to any specialty. Its meaning to me as a commander is to focus ruthlessly on my mission-essential task list and be willing to let some of the “nice to haves” fall off to the side if it means improving my unit’s core competencies. —CPT Patrick Snyder

*You cannot do every task assigned to you every time. Know which balls you are going to drop, and know why you picked them to drop.*  
—CPT J.D. Mohundro

■ **“Don’t make the maneuver commander take his eyes off the fight looking for logistics; you should already be there.”** My first company commander, then-CPT Tracie Henry-Neill, told me this in my first week in Ramadi, Iraq. If logisticians do not think like this, they will fail the maneuver commanders. Logistics leaders should be capable of utilizing a multitude of systems to track the progress of the battle and to pinpoint what requirements need to be fulfilled before the supported commander ever keys his or her mic requesting resupply. —CPT Erik Anthes

■ **“If he’s a check-the-block kind of guy, then give him more blocks to check.”** What this means to me is that you have to know how your people think in order to influence them to accomplish a common goal. As a leader, you shouldn’t sit and complain that a subordinate isn’t performing how you would like; know each of your subordinates well enough to know how to lead them. —CPT Timothy Biocic

■ **“Provide ruthless predictability.”** Subordinates should

be able to expect that you will react consistently to events rather than react with a level of inconsistency that creates instability within the unit. I heard this from U.S. Marine Corps Col. B.P. McCoy, who wrote *Passion of Command: The Moral Imperative of Leadership*. He and I talked on the phone when my officers and I were reading his book as part of our professional-development program. He shared his thoughts on the book, combat and command. It was awesome! —Col. C.J. Douglas, USMC

■ **“Sometimes, the most effective advice comes not from what is said, but from how it is said.”** The absolute lowest point of my first command was when we had a Soldier who had been reassigned to my unit because of a rape investigation turn around and rape one of my Soldiers. I was angry at the system for giving this dirtbag to us, angry at



MAJ Dave Gohlich values this simple truth: *“Your men are not here to serve you. ... You’re here to serve them.”*





CPT Erik Anthes, left, remembers being told: "Don't make the maneuver commander take his eyes off the fight looking for logistics."

him, angry at the victim, angry at the chain of command and angry at myself for not following my instinct and treating him like the (alleged) serial rapist he was. When this happened, I worked all night getting the victim the support she needed and getting the (alleged) perpetrator into pretrial confinement. Then I spent the next morning doing up the paperwork, talking with the staff judge advocate, talking with the sexual assault victim advocate, and sending up new serious incident reports as more info came in. In short, I was spending all my time dealing with the aftermath of one (allegedly) bad Soldier's actions. It took a concentrated effort to remain professional, especially with everyone and their brother coming out of the woodwork to tell me what I needed to do.

Around 1300 hours, I got a call from my battalion commander.

"Where are you at?" he demanded to know.

"Sir," I explained, "I am in my office doing up the paperwork for—"

"I am in your motor pool! Get down here now!"

As I rushed down to the motor pool, I was thinking, "Oh, no, what now?" I really didn't know how I was going to deal with one more thing. I went up to my battalion commander, fully expecting to get laid out over some minutia that he was famous for being a stickler on. When I got to him, however, he pulled me aside and said:

"Take a look around here. Look at all these Soldiers who are doing the right thing. You needed to get out of that office and see them down here doing the right thing. They need to see you, too."

Had he just called me up and told me that, it wouldn't have had the same effect. I didn't just need to be told; I needed to be removed from the situation. I didn't need to hear; I needed to see. —CPT John Hollein

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*We are grateful to Hollein for launching this conversation in the CompanyCommand forum back in 2008! A member replied to the long-forgotten discussion thread in 2013, bumping it back into our consciousness. We hope that this compilation of advice—so meaningful to us—makes a difference in your development as a leader. If you are a commissioned company-grade officer who is passionate about growing and leading combat-effective teams, we invite you to join the conversation at <http://CC.army.mil>. To contact the CompanyCommand team, email [CoCmd.team@us.army.mil](mailto:CoCmd.team@us.army.mil).*



**Connecting in conversation...  
...becoming more effective.**



*Art by Jody Harmon*

**Have you joined your forum?**