

18 Things I Look For in a Senior Rater

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Last week, one of my favorite blogs – *From the Green Notebook* – ran a guest piece called, [31 Things Your Senior Rater Would Like You to Know That He Probably Won't Tell You](#). Quite a mouthful. While I disagreed with nearly everything that the author said, he did start a good conversation on leadership styles that has bloomed into additional posts and responses, such as a very thoughtful and mature response from Steve Leonard – the erstwhile creator of Doctrine Man! – [here](#).

For many of us junior officers, the original post threw up a lot of red flags. The author seemed to care more about appearances than substantive leadership, or to put it more simply, he wanted form over function. It got me thinking about what I look for from my senior rater. Granted, no lieutenant colonel is going to change his or her ways because of the opinion of a lieutenant. I realize this. But mid-level leaders do need to engage their troops, just as we junior officers engage our enlisted soldiers. You can't mentor us if we're not listening, after all.

So, not unlike a Tinder profile, here is what junior officers look for in a senior rater.



Please don't be this kind of senior rater. (John Robinson/AP)

Okay, not Tinder, bad example.

1. Counseling. Ever.

There's this nifty part of the new Officer Evaluation Report Support Form where the rater has to include the dates that she or he has counseled the rated soldier. It would be pretty fantastic if the senior rater counseled the rated officer, even if it was just once. That face-to-face session would accomplish more than ten officer professional development meetings packed into one.

2. Do you let my troops and I do our job or do you demand we stop everything to cater to you?

Everyone loves a distinguished visitor visit to their training area. It usually comes with a cessation of training, or some canned training that does no one any good and should irritate the visiting leader. The best leaders stop in quickly, ask a few pointed questions of soldiers, but let the training continue. Troops enjoy showing off what they're good at, but they don't want to feel like performing monkeys.

3. Do you play favorites?

We junior officers are a fairly perceptive bunch, and when you start showing favoritism, it can result in a loss of respect for the senior leader. Especially since the officer that is often considered the favorite is usually adept at the ancient art of kissing ass. You have your favorites, everyone does, just try not to display it openly.

4. Is your staff supportive or are they always putting up roadblocks?

Battalion and brigade staffs are usually a reflection of the commander, so if the staff spends more time asking me for minute data or telling me no, I'm going to assume that they are reflecting your priorities.

5. Are you going to back me up or pin me to the wall as an example?

We talk a lot about assuming risk to enhance training. Will you back me up if I assume some reasonable risk for a high payoff training event, or will you be "by-the-book" and throw me under the Army bus?

6. What is your priority, looking good or being good?

We all know the units that look really good on the outside but are rotten in the center. That rot will show up under pressure. Do you want us to look good, or do you want us to kick ass at our mission? There's a difference between being good and looking good, and we'd prefer the former.

7. Is your command sergeant major there because of their knowledge and skills, or just because you wanted someone who was abrasive and would keep first sergeants angry?

Too often we see command sergeants major who seem to have been picked because of their uncanny ability to pick out the one person in formation without a reflective belt, or who excel at yelling. The role of CSM is incredibly important, as they are the advocates for the enlisted and non-commissioned officer corps, ensure that standards are being enforced to maintain the health and welfare of soldiers, and be the voice of reason to often unreasonable officers. A good, thoughtful, and fair CSM can be a force multiplier.

8. Your spouse does not outrank my spouse, and vice versa

Our spouses decided to be with us because they like us, not because they get excited about pulling rank on other spouses. If your spouse decides that he or she outranks my spouse, I can tell you that my significant other will be significantly absent from most unit events and that I will significantly back them up on that decision.

9. We are going to judge you by how you treat your staff

Word gets around inside the battalion. If staff officers enjoy coming to visit the line units because they offer a better command climate, we're going to hear about it. And staff officers are people too, no matter how sad and miserable their lives are.

10. Is your OPD actually for development or is it clearly checking the box?

Everyone loves some professional development to put on their OER. It's too easy to make everyone read "How I brought the message to Garcia" (which is also a great way to get everyone angry and malcontent). A good OPD that challenges the mind, furthers the profession, and engages our interest will keep us bought into your leadership philosophy.

11. Again with the, "Kids these days?"

Hi, I'm a Millennial, so are all the rest of the lieutenants. Don't like it? Tough, we're the future of the Army. So maybe use your experience and education to work with us, instead of telling us that our generation is lazy and demanding that we conform to your generation's ideas of professionalism.

12. Don't dictate superfluous purchases in the name of "dedication to the profession"

My finances are my business. If I am in debt and this damages my performance, then it becomes your business as well. However, if I decline to buy mess dress with bullion braiding because that \$675 would be better spent on a future investment, paying down a car loan or spousal student loan, or a savings account for my children, then that's none of your damn business.

13. Tell us the so-what

You've been around the Army for a while, you understand how all of this works. For new officers, and even those who have been around for a few years, the Army often seems like the rules are all made up and the points don't matter. Obviously, that's not how it works. Explain problems to us from your perspective, instead of saying, "Well, it is what it is." Sure, some officers still won't get it, but they're probably the ones that never will. The rest of us will really appreciate the time and effort.

14. Your Support Form

This goes hand-in-hand with counseling. I know I'm *supposed* to have it, but let's be honest, it's like the multi-source feedback assessment: we all say we've done it, but have we ever seen the results?

15. Do you show interest in our troops?

Are you around, talking to the joes, showing an interest in their welfare, or do you only talk to senior NCO's and officers?

16. Don't make unit functions mandatory for family attendance

My wife and family have their own lives. We cannot drop everything to attend a battalion or unit function at the drop of a hat. Demonstrating that you realize that families have dynamics outside the Army will go a long way in building my family's trust in the institution.

17. We're not looking for your badges or patches, we just want to see the passion and drive to succeed

Most young officers are pretty hard-charging, all full of vim and vigor from their commissioning source. Yes, seeing a senior rater with all sorts of badges, tabs, patches, and doodads might excite some, but what really gets us motivated is a leader who is impassioned, eloquent, and can speak to the problems we see every day on the line.

18. Assume Risk

We all know that there isn't enough time in the training calendar to get through all Army mandatory training, as well as individual and collective unit training. There are items, however, in AR 350-1, that are left up to the commander's discretion. Assume some risk, come up with imaginative ways to mitigate the residual risk, and give us more days to do our jobs.