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In Case You Didn't Know It, Things Are Very Different Now: Part 1



By Major General Tony Cucolo, U.S. Army (Ret.)

Over the length of my time in uniform, I often found myself scratching my head and saying to no one in particular, "I wish someone had told me that..." So, I make it a point to wherever and whenever possible pass on the tribal wisdom and scar tissue that only comes from personal trial and error during long-service in a closed society like the military.

Here's the premise of this article: the expectations of a Major are very different than those of a Captain, and not everyone knows what these expectations are or the impact they have on personal and professional success. I want to share my thoughts on this to help you be successful – successful for the right reasons.

"Noted."

If you are a Major, you have left the ranks of the "sprinters" and quietly committed to the "marathon" – you've mastered your varying pace for the hills and the flats, but are uncertain of the location of that distant finish line. As the underlying title of the article states, you may not realize it, but there are new expectations of you as a Major. Honestly, sincerely, it really is automatic: the day after you pin on or Velcro that oak leaf to your uniform, you are judged differently, and you may not realize it. People (seniors) will watch you, form impressions, and pass judgement about you – and never tell you. Hard to explain why, and some may argue with me, but we senior leaders are quick to correct a Lieutenant and we won't hesitate to say, "Captain, what the...?" But a Major who just doesn't quite "get it"? Well...we quietly say to ourselves, "Noted," and slide the image of that man or woman to the bottom of our mental order of merit list.

I have seen wonderful young officers both in combat and in the garrison environment fail to adjust to the issues I will cover here. They were left behind for the wrong reasons, leaving the Army at a great disadvantage for missing their talent. Certainly a lack of coaching by myself and others was patently unfair. I woke up to my own coaching shortcomings just prior to assuming Brigade Command when an outstanding young Major whom I rated was damned with faint praise and given a mediocre rating. When I confronted the senior rater about it, he told me, "Tim (not his name) is...well, he's just a rough cut...he's never grown up...he looks and acts like a Lieutenant..." I was crushed; I had failed Tim. It was my job to "raise" Tim properly, but I let Tim be Tim: with the ever-present dip cup,

moderately crude language, clumsy social skills, scruffy outdoorsman appearance, and pronouncements of “Hell, sir, I can’t go to that event, I don’t own a suit...shoot, I don’t even own a tie.” I let Tim be Tim because he was one hell of a fine warrior, the best tactician and trainer I had, and was beloved by all. I thought everyone saw Tim the way I did: a future battalion commander and then some. I was wrong.

Field Grade duties are varied, far-flung, and put you in operational and strategic settings – sometimes with little or no notice – engaging the full spectrum of thought leaders, key influencers and decision makers, from the civilian intellectual elite to senior foreign military officials. I didn’t help Tim understand he needed to make some personal changes for this new level of duty if he was to be taken seriously as a future senior leader.

Smarting from this personal failure, I went into Brigade Command with a pitch deck, a briefing, and a coaching session that is the basis of this article. I have given some form of this article’s contents to the senior Captains and Majors of every organization I led from 1999 – 2014. Over the years and as recently as last month, I’ve passed on the slide deck to countless peers and rising senior leaders. I want to minimize Majors being “noted” and ensure that their success is for their Character, Courage, and Competence, and not lose a good officer because someone felt they were “a rough cut.” I pass on this tribal wisdom to you now.

If you have made it this far in the article, fair warning: some of the things I will lay out for you will seem light and relatively meaningless to men and women in the profession of arms of a Nation at war, but they are still important. Some of what I will discuss sets us apart as professionals, as Officers, and is the Military Tradition.

Let’s First Acknowledge Major is a Tough Rank

You are at a unique mid-point in your military service, and some people have trouble in this stretch. They lose their way and drift off the azimuth of their moral compass. I can empathize with this: the majority of those at Grade O-4 come into a personal time period and are of a certain age where they might question their choices in life as they face an uncertain future. They may be dealing with new family challenges (children becoming young adults, parents aging, strained relationships) and during this stretch of years it is not unusual to have some form of a “midlife crisis.” Additionally, and unfortunately, some Majors’ approach to work and life gets clouded by ambition: LTC and LTC-level command is much closer than that long stretch from Company Grade to Field Grade. This results in a self-inflicted urgency to be competitive in ways that weaken character. This form of ambition also makes some Majors adopt the traits of their seniors – “He/she became a Brigade Commander; I’ll act that way, too,” and as a result they are not themselves and become disingenuous. One thing is certain: the pace, tempo, and high visibility of duties at the Major level expose those of weak character quickly, which is good for the Service to identify and terminate the flawed. Unfortunately, those same tough conditions can weaken solid character over time if the officer allows them to. If there is any solace in this, it is the fact so many pass through this challenging period stronger and ready for greater authority and responsibility. But it requires a high degree of self-awareness and introspection along the way.

Foundational Coaching Point: Reevaluate Why You Serve and Write/Rewrite Your Definition of Success

Life was fairly clear as a Company Grade Officer, wasn’t it? The path to Company Command or its equivalent, through small unit leadership and key staff duties and the scheduled and required schooling was a busy blur, primarily because of the treadmill of deployments. But now as a Major, those fantastic, rewarding moments with Soldiers and tight-knit units are fewer and fewer. The types of assignments are numerous and unfamiliar, and you are no doubt getting all kinds of advice on

what you need to do to be “successful.” Borrowing from doctrine, an “unknown and unknowable” personal future is a really good reason to self-reflect and re-evaluate why you serve. Your reasons for serving might be different now – and they may need to be different: if there are no more companies to command, and if your direct service with Soldiers is infrequent, what is your motivation? Defining your success in life and in the military profession (two different definitions, I would offer) will help you find your motivation and recommit for the long haul. Give it a shot: write down your definition of success in the military. If it is tied to rank or position, rewrite until it does not. It may seem counterintuitive, but try it. Use words like “contribution” or “impact.” To define your personal success as “Lieutenant Colonel and Battalion level command” would be a mistake. What if one or both do not happen – would you be a failure? Of course not. Again, give this a shot. Write to me if you have problems coming up with your personal definition of success; I’d be happy to assist you.

Primary Coaching Point: Establish a Personal and Professional Package of Life Habits That Routinely Make a Great First Impression.

When you least expect it, you will be thrust into the limelight and be judged. So, assume with great confidence you will be watched and judged all the time – I say again, all the time, on and off duty. To be effective under these conditions you need habits, life habits, that result in you always making a great first impression. At this level and beyond, ladies and gentlemen, the first impression is all you are going to get. Call this suite of life habits your “Personal and Professional Package” – they are yours, they must be whole with no elements missing, and they require constant gut-checks and maintenance. But keep it packed correctly and you will be ready for anything and be judged more appropriately on the intrinsic value you bring to any organization or setting. I will list these elements recommended life habits in short bursts.

Humility: The Enabler of Selfless Servant Leadership

In conversation, absolutely minimize stories about yourself and practice making self-effacing personal comments. Discipline your awareness of how much you are transmitting versus how much you are receiving, and you will be welcome in all settings.

Be the anonymous hero (don’t ever seek credit for your work) – you won’t be anonymous for long – and always deflect praise. You respond to “Lori, that was an outstanding job,” with “Thanks, sir, but I have a great team; they carried the load.”

Be quick to compliment – everyone – but especially your peers, and particularly in public. You say things like, “Ma’am, you should look at Mike’s analysis; it’s outstanding and I think it’s what you’re looking for,” with Mike sitting there.

In word and deed, place your peers before yourself. Always. You may not realize it right now, but the lion’s share of your professional reputation from this moment forward is based on how well you care for peers. And by the way, you don’t need to know a peer; a peer is someone who is basically at the same station in life as you and needs a hand. A US Navy Lt. Commander I’d never seen before walked into my office in the Pentagon and asked, “You the Western Europe guy? I need your help.” Some years later we were fellow Flag/General Officers in Iraq and I needed his help. He remembered my assistance and immediately moved heaven and earth for me, even though I had forgotten that moment.

Accentuate the positive in people and situations whenever possible. You will be at the nexus of gossip, innuendo, backbiting and vocalized bias. Do not join in; in fact, counter it thoughtfully. This is a critically important habit for you. As you get more senior, you will directly impact the climate and culture of increasingly larger organizations. Start this habit now, and you will have the reflexive

emotional muscle memory to create and sustain positive, “we’re in this together” climates wherever you go – and people will want to serve with you.

Kick butt, chew tail, and make crushing corrections when you must, but if the act of doing so *doesn't* bother you, something is wrong. You should not enjoy it. If you do, check yourself. When you have to make a serious correction on an individual, make a habit of pausing, forming words before you speak that focus on the issue, avoiding personal attacks that demean with a verbal or written delivery is under control.

Work Ethic: “Row Well and Live”

There is simply no getting around it: a Major is expected to have a faster rate, greater volume, and higher quality of output than a Captain. It is expected. Immediately.

Majors always answer the mail. Majors are never selective about what they choose to work on, what they respond to, and they never sit back and say, “No one has asked for that lately, it must not be important.”

Majors “Go find Garcia.” If you haven’t read “Message to Garcia,” a short story written at the turn of the 19th century by Elbert Hubbard, check it out. Might take you five minutes to read, but the lesson is clear: when given a task, grab the mission and intent, and move out and draw fire. Try to answer your own questions first, before you bog down others with requests for information. It’s a good gut-check on professional laziness.

I worked my tail off as a Major in every different duty I was assigned, but learned volumes while doing so. Just remember when you feel the heavy weight of that junior field grade rucksack: in the great scheme of life, you are only a Major for a brief time, so... “Row well and live.” (in the figurative sense!)

Active Listening: Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

You’re now the author of critical documents (memo’s, plans, orders, etc.) that can impact hundreds, thousands of lives or influence policy. Listen to guidance and instructions from your boss...use their words, that is, give their words back to them in appropriate form. Listen and use what you hear! You will be surprised at the number of your peers who fail at this. “I know what he said, but here’s what we’re going to do...” and “She didn’t really mean...” are the words of people who are “noted.”

Here’s a tip, though, from personal scar tissue: if you have a tough boss who gives little guidance, offers you next to nothing to “listen to,” or says, “I’ll know what I want when I see it,” gain and maintain contact for guidance by passing them early drafts of your task – long before the suspense date – and them for azimuth checks. I worked for a boss like that as a Major. It only took me one painful briefing build to learn I needed to send something in early after being given no or generally worthless guidance. When my initial draft came back to me with scratches, gallons of red ink, and a hearty, “Cucolo, that isn’t even close to what I want...” all that correction I received was precisely the guidance I needed to meet the mark with the final product.

A combination of active listening and humility also means you can meet the expectation of maturely accepting criticism. In verbal communication, especially when being critiqued, listen carefully and deny yourself the urge to stop listening in order to form and spew defensive comments. Just listen and “take the shot.”

Effective Communication: A Higher Standard of Written and Verbal Skills

It is expected that you can write and speak well, and further, that you will work to become an even better speaker, writer, briefer. If you find yourself in a slump – briefing didn't go well, memo was a re-do – prove you can do better seeking another chance. Trust me, the noticeable effort to improve yourself will be greatly appreciated and valued.

When speaking and writing use candor, always, but argue your points persuasively without alienating those who disagree. Tip: use empathy when communicating. Who is the audience/who are the different audiences? What are they thinking and feeling right now? What is it I can write or say that will be memorable to them – and perhaps repeatable and shareable?

With your seniors, practice brevity in spoken and written comms and always answer any question asked – immediately. Tell your leaders what they need to know, not what you think they want to know. If a history lesson is required to give your answer context, answer the question up front, and give an abridged history after you answer the question.

Write e-mails for fast, to-the-point, easily understood reading. If there is an attachment, summarize it briefly in the e-mail. A classic moment with one of my Majors: his e-mail to me: “Sir, the 495-page report to Congress is attached.” My e-mail back: “Thanks, Bob. Could you lift out and summarize what impacts us here, please?” His immediate response: “Sir, an EXSUM of the report is at pages ii through 93.” I wrote back: “Roger that, Bob. Noted.”

Speak and write as though you will be quoted globally (you might be). I once gave a briefing at what I thought was a minor unmanned aerial system conference in Northern Virginia. The next day I was quoted by Xinhua, the official press agency of the Peoples Republic of China.

When you pin on Major, the expectation is that you are acutely aware that inclusive language is powerful and a key to team building, that recognition and praise have high impact, and the off-hand comment has high impact. The expectation is that you will not only think before you speak, but you will take purposeful care in the way you craft what you say and what you write.

You are a fully committed representative of the profession and the institution now, so there is an expectation that you will also communicate the love you have for what you do. Passion is allowed – and effective. Just remember, publicly communicating with passion is good, communicating with emotion is not. Learn the difference. Contact me if you need help on this one.

Exceptional Personal Behavior: Rare is the Second Chance

You have entered the ranks of the highest expectations of personal behavior. There is a near-zero – not zero but near zero – tolerance for lapses in judgment concerning personal behavior. This means you must exercise self-control over all of your appetites, desires, and emotions. When presented with opportunities you're not sure about, apply the classic questions, how would this look to my Soldiers? How would it look on the front page? On the unit Facebook page?

There is also the expectation that you're the officer that never strays from the straight and narrow, the one who stays sober at the unit formal, and looks after/helps prevent other folks' lapses in judgement, especially possible lapses of peers, or even your Commander or Command Sergeant Major. An oft-asked question when I had to deal with senior leader misconduct in a unit was, “Where was the XO? Where was the 3?” The expectation is that you are the first line of defense in the mature self-police of the profession.

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