

31 Things Your Senior Rater Would Like You to Know That He Probably Won't Tell You



By LTC Dominick Edwards

I have begun a lot of self-reflection as I near the end of my nearly 24-year career in the US Army. One of the topics that comes to mind is how many “unspoken norms” there are in the Army and how we all become aware of them. This list is a result of some of these thoughts that I’d like to share with you and are intended to provide some of my observations gained from watching people who have “done it right.” When I was a battalion commander, I noticed trends in behavior that many did not realize had any influence on their career. I’m not implying that I did it all right, because I learned a lot along the way by watching great leaders and by making mistakes myself.

Below is a short list intended to help you succeed in the Army. I am certain that there are many other things that should be on the list, but here is what I’ve come up with. You may disagree with some points, others may seem too “old school” to be valuable, and some may simply reflect my personal idiosyncrasies. However, I would ask you to read through to the end and consider the points, and discuss among other Army professionals. If you’re in doubt, ask your current senior rater what he or she thinks. The resulting conversation will be very enlightening.

Social Life

1. Hail and Farewells, balls, dining ins, and other unit social events are not optional.

2. When the invitation for the event says there is a theme, dress the part and have fun with it.
3. Don't wear cargo shorts and sandals to the hail and farewell unless that is the theme.
4. Unless kids are specifically invited to an event, hire a babysitter.
5. Don't bring your dog to unit function unless pets are specifically included. However, if your dog is not well socialized with other people and dogs – it's best to leave him at home.
6. You should attend changes of command, changes of responsibility, award ceremonies, volunteer recognition ceremonies and other key unit events. Unless you're in the field, you can usually break away for an hour to support the unit.
7. Thank you notes may seem "old school," but they are appreciated and tell me a lot about you and your values. If you are a company commander and all of your lieutenants and NCOs send one after an event at my home – you wind up looking like a superstar.
8. When in doubt, err on the side of formality. No one will mind if you're overdressed or too polite. They will notice if you go too far to the other extreme.

Legal Matters

9. If you're going to be a character witness for someone, you should know something about the Soldier's character – how he spends his free time, who he associates with, etc. Coming in to see the commander as a "character witness" and talking about job performance (he's never been late, he's very fit, he qualified expert, etc) makes you look like a poor leader who does not know his Soldiers. It also means you don't understand what you should be doing. You are supposed to represent the Soldier's CHARACTER, which requires knowing something about him or her and their Family. You are not helping the commander make a decision because he already knows about the Soldier's competence in most cases. Most UCMJ is not due to incompetence, which is why you're called a "character witness." Additionally, you should know exactly what they are accused of. If you are not familiar with the case, you can never be certain what sort of behavior you might be endorsing. Lots of well-intentioned lieutenants and junior NCOs wind up looking foolish when they find out what that "outstanding Soldier and Leader" is accused of and the evidence that is against them.
10. If you are a character witness and you know everything you can about the accused's character, what he is accused of, and the evidence against him or her and you feel that the behavior in question is out of character, then you should stand up for him or her. It's your obligation as a leader. However, you have to understand your role. You are probably not going to influence a decision on guilt or innocence – you should be contributing to how the commander will mitigate punishment. If the offense is not too egregious and you're speaking on behalf of a good Soldier, you can save him or her from the maximum punishment.
11. Items 9 and 10 also apply if you're asked to write a letter of support on behalf of a former Soldier who is at a different location.
12. If you are appointed as an investigating officer, do a good job. Your reputation and professionalism are tied to this product. Be thorough and quick. Have someone proofread your investigation. Then have someone else proofread it. The battalion XO and I will read every single page so we can make the right decision on behalf of the Army's

interests. Remember that if I've initiated an investigation, then someone has something significant at stake. It could be reputation, it could be thousands of dollars, or it could be a career. You need to be fast to reduce stress on the accused. Your role is to present the facts and recommendations that enable my decision and you have to be right because of the stakes involved. Never forget that every investigation is ultimately about a person and your actions will directly impact him or her.

Dress and Appearance

13. Somewhere between BOLC and MCCC, most officers figure out if they are going to stay in the Army beyond their initial term. Once you make that decision, you need to buy Dress Mess and start wearing it whenever it is appropriate. NCOs should seriously consider it once they are a sergeant first class and should absolutely buy it once they become master sergeants. Owning Dress Mess is one very visible outward sign that you're committed to the profession – plus it is significantly more comfortable than the Army Service Uniform.
14. If you're a Major, you must have Dress Mess. Field Grade officers wearing the Army Service Uniform at a ball look like rookies. Everyone notices.
15. Speaking of Dress Mess – pay the extra money for bullion rank. It is worth the cost and I'll notice. It's one of those small touches that tells me you're committed to the Profession. While you're at it, get bullion for all of your dress uniforms.

Family Life

16. If you want to stay in the Army for a full career, remember that your entire Family is serving. Get them involved in the Army Life. You all will miss out if the Army is “that thing he does.”
17. It's OK if your spouse works.
18. If the first time I meet your spouse and kids is at your farewell, you've messed up and missed a huge opportunity for me to learn more about the type of person and leader you are. You've also cheated your Family out of a great experience.
19. How well you choose your spouse says a lot about who you are.
20. Help and encourage your spouse to get involved in the Army. It will benefit both of you.
21. I'm watching your kids. If they are brats and refuse to behave, then I wonder what how you're going to lead Soldiers effectively. And yes, I understand the difference between a “bad day” and a kid who is undisciplined. I also can usually figure out if your child has special needs that impact his or her behavior. I can absolutely discern a parent who accepts and condones poor behavior.
22. Teach your children to speak to adults. Teach them to introduce themselves to others. They won't want to, but it will go a long way in their development and shows what sort of person, parent, and leader you are.
23. If you are engaged, get your fiancé involved in the Army as soon as you can – preferably before you are married.
24. Your spouse's involvement throughout your career is helping shape the sort of senior spouse she will be. Over the years, she will learn how things should be done, how not to

do some things, and she will gain friends and mentors along the way. She will also become a mentor to someone else along the way.

General Advice

25. Every encounter with me matters. Maximize the quantity of these encounters. This is done by attending social functions, unit events, by inviting me to your training events, and by not avoiding me when I'm in your AO.
26. Don't be afraid to ask for counseling or for mentorship; I'll always make time to have those discussions because I want to be involved in your career and I want to help you succeed.
27. You may hate the things the Command Sergeant Major does, but he's probably doing something I asked him to do or something that I delegated to him. The same goes for the Executive Officer and the Operations Officer. I've defined their roles and responsibilities very carefully and they are doing something that needs to be done to make the unit run.
28. You need to know how to write effectively. Poor writing limits your potential in the Army and creates a burden on your supervisor. There will be a time in your career where you are judged almost entirely on your ability to write effectively. Learn the right way to write an award and an evaluation.
29. I learn about you in various ways. Our direct contact is possibly the least significant since it is very limited. I'm asking your commander about you; I'm asking the Command Sergeant Major about you; I'm asking your ISG about you; I'm talking to your NCOs and Soldiers about you; I'm talking to Family members about you; I watch how you and your peers interact; the Majors tell me about you; if you are married, I get insight about you from your wife and her interaction with the other spouses (including mine).
30. If I tell you I want feedback, then I want the truth. I trust officers and NCOs to tell the truth – even if it's uncomfortable. I trust you all to let me know what's happening in the unit that I can't observe. I can't fix problems that I am unaware of and I can't help the Soldiers in the unit if no one tells me what is going on.
31. Finally, always remember that your commander **CHOSE** to command. Yes, commanders are busy; but they are in the best jobs of their career and they want to make a difference. Never let your perception of how busy you think they are keep you from reaching out. Some of the best conversations and most lasting relationships came from the leaders who took time to seek me out. As I leave the Army, I truly cherish those conversations.

As I said in the introduction, these are some of the “unspoken norms” that I've observed over my Army career. Unless you find a good mentor who can be 100% honest, you may miss out on a couple of them. Why is this? There are many reasons that range from leaders assuming you already know this stuff to leaders being reluctant to “put the squeeze on the guys” to attend an event. Regardless, following most of these rules will make your life easier and will help you make a very good impression on your senior rater. At the end of the day, your career success is tied to ensuring he or she knows that you are a great leader and following these points will help make that impression each time you interact.