

# More Than a Ceremony: Conducting Battalion-Level Changes of Command

by MAJ Thomas N. Anderson

Transitions are natural and frequent occurrences in an Army unit, and it is typically during those moments of transition where the unit encounters the most risk to the success of its mission. Consequently, units that can best anticipate and prepare for transitions typically are the most successful units, whether the transitions involve a physical movement such as a deployment or the loss of key personnel from the unit. Conversely, units that fail to plan well for periods of transition tend to suffer significant setbacks and lose momentum during challenging times. Good staffs help their commanders manage transitions and mitigate potential risk.

As the squadron executive officer for 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, I was the commander of troops for the squadron change-of-command ceremony in Spring 2015 as we welcomed our new command team to the squadron. The Soldiers looked sharp, and the ceremony was flawless. We succeeded with the official change of command.

During the weeks leading up to the ceremony, our staff helped the new commander learn about the organization before taking command. I was relatively satisfied our new commander had every bit of information needed for success. However, five months later, events in the life of the squadron demonstrated I could have helped manage the transition better for my commander; I should have tailored our pre-change of command timeline better to ensure the incoming commander received what he really needed to know and see.

## What we did right

**Treat it like an operation.** When our squadron staff received news a change of command would occur, we immediately initiated planning through the military decision-making process (MDMP). We briefed our outgoing commander on each staff section's analysis of the events required to properly educate the new commander on the status of our unit and its activities. This was probably the most important thing we did right because we incorporated the various concerns of the leaders in the staff. We developed a timeline that addressed nearly all the staff's concerns. Therefore, most of the things we did right resulted from this collaborative process.

**Schedule command-climate survey.** Army Directive 2013-29 requires battalion-level commanders to complete a command-climate survey within 60 days of a change of command. The survey offers the new commander another way to assess the unit, in addition to personal observations and others' input. Command-climate surveys are currently processed through a software application on the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute Website ([www.deomi.org](http://www.deomi.org)).

**Tour post facilities.** Based on recent guidance from the Infantry and Armor Branches, most battalion commanders will not be allowed to serve at the same duty location where they served as majors. Consequently, each new battalion commander requires a tour of the post facilities and an introduction to the key individuals at each facility. Especially critical to most commanders will be a tour of the training ranges, simulation facilities and the Range Control facility so they can understand the unit's current training plan in context.

**Conduct weekly battle-rhythm events.** It is crucial for the new commander to experience "how" the battalion executes routine events such as the weekly training meeting and command-and-staff updates. These events provide the new commander an opportunity to conduct an initial assessment of leader personalities and communication abilities.

**Plan and resource change-of-command ceremony.** Perhaps the most obvious part of the battalion change-of-command process is the ceremony because it requires the most detailed coordination – including reservation of the ceremony site, inviting distinguished visitors (including the commanding general) and planning rehearsals. Many aids are available on-line for this process.

**Schedule counseling with brigade commander.** Once the new commander begins in-processing, it is critical to schedule initial counseling for him/her with the brigade commander. Accomplishing this early in the process ensures the new commander can nest initial guidance for subordinates with the brigade commander's guidance.

**Conduct Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) and Equal Opportunity (EO) programs in-briefs.** "SHARP remains a top priority for both the Secretary of the Army and the Chief of Staff of the Army,"<sup>1</sup> so we ensured the new commander understood the status of the program within the battalion. This included briefings about ongoing cases and the training history of the subordinate units. Also, our EO program leader briefed the new commander in a similar manner. This interaction with the SHARP and EO leads for our squadron ensured the new commander knew who to go to if issues developed that required immediate action in these areas.

**Review non-deployable roster.** With the current drawdown in the Army, every Soldier who can deploy matters to the unit's ability to accomplish its deployed mission. This is especially true now because the Army will no longer fill our ranks at more than 100 percent strength as it did at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the squadron level, our unit conducts a review, with the squadron physician's assistant and the subordinate commanders present, once every two weeks to track the status of all non-deployable Soldiers within the squadron. Facilitating the new commander's understanding of the specific details of the unit's non-deployable personnel provides an accurate picture of what the battalion's assigned strength really means when coupled with the non-deployable roster.

**Update battalion policy letters.** Outside of "command philosophy," most policy letters should not be altered significantly until the new commander has a chance to evaluate the unit. Soldiers need to be aware the policies of the former commander remain in effect until the new commander changes them. However, posted policy letters still bearing the previous commander's signature weeks after a change of command reflect poorly on the organization's staff.

**Tour barracks and motorpool.** The new commander needs to know where the Soldiers primarily work and live to understand the unit. Therefore touring the barracks before assuming command lets the Soldiers know the new commander cares about their quality of life. Inspecting the motorpool allows the new commander to check the unit's safety conditions and assess how the unit takes care of its vehicles and equipment.

## What we missed

**Receive introductions from staff sections / specialties.** Although we planned aggressively for each staff section to individually brief the new commander on the unit's personnel, duties and responsibilities, time constraints resulted in our failure to have all staff sections brief the new commander. This could have biased the new commander toward particular staff sections (positively or negatively), and it could also have created a less accurate understanding of all the staff's activities.

**Receive introductions from subordinate units at their headquarters.** We were successful in having several subordinate unit commanders brief the new commander on their teams at their own headquarters (which allowed the new commander to see the subordinate commanders in their daily environments). Unfortunately, not all the subordinate commanders were able to do so. In this sense, the staff failed to prioritize the new commander's calendar to enable one of the most important events to happen at the subordinate-unit level, a proper introduction to the new commander.

**Meet the battalion's families.** Because our unit deployed immediately after the change-of-command ceremony (within one week), there was not enough time for the squadron commander to meet with the families without taking time away from their last week with their Soldiers prior to the deployment. Without the impending deployment, a "unit family day" after the change-of-command ceremony would have been an appropriate way to introduce the families to the new commander.

**Meet family-readiness group (FRG) leaders.** We also failed to provide the new commander an opportunity to meet FRG leaders from the subordinate units. This would have made the squadron more effective during its subsequent deployment because the new commander would have heard directly from the FRG leaders about the status of their unit's FRG program. This would have helped the commander better direct assets to support the units with respect to the programs that support families at home station.

**Counsel subordinates and view counseling of subordinates.** Although we scheduled time for the new commander to counsel his subordinate commanders and field-grade officers individually, our staff did not allocate time for the new commander to inspect and review the counseling of subordinate leaders. This would have shown the new commander whether or not counseling was being conducted to standard at the lower echelons. It would have also provided insight into which subordinates had good leadership-development plans within their organizations.

**View subordinate units' property-accountability procedures.** At the troop and company levels, changes of command focus significantly on property accountability and the transfer of property from one commander to another. During a battalion change of command, there is no property book transfer, but property accountability procedures are still vitally important. New commanders must be given the opportunity to inspect subordinate-unit property-accountability procedures and paperwork because company-level property concerns can quickly become battalion-level problems through the initiation of Financial Liability Investigation of Property Loss procedures.

**Order more battalion coins.** Battalion commanders are authorized the purchase of unit coins to recognize excellence and reward high-performing individuals. More often than not, though, an outgoing commander will wish to reward the Soldiers and leaders he/she worked with during the preceding years by giving out those coins until they are exhausted. Therefore, a good staff needs to order new coins prior to the new commander taking command to allow for the continued recognition and reward of excellence without interruption.

**Schedule visits with other battalion commanders.**<sup>2</sup> The new commander needs to meet subordinates, superiors and future peers. Allocating time for the new commander to meet with peers is particularly important. The other battalion commanders represent a new commander's peer set for the next several years, and getting acquainted with the more experienced battalion commanders allows the new commander to be able to reach out and ask questions of peers during the crucial first two or three weeks in command.

**Schedule visit with brigade command sergeant major.**<sup>3</sup> No one has a more important relationship with the brigade commander than the brigade command sergeant major, so meeting with him/her provides the new squadron (battalion) commander good insight into the brigade command team's real concerns. The brigade command sergeant major can also provide important feedback to the new commander about the unit's reputation and the state of morale and training in the ranks.

**Receive overview of the Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS) program.**<sup>4</sup> The battalion's families are important for the new commander to get to know, but taking care of single Soldiers should also be a priority for the new commander. Therefore it's important for the staff to allocate time for the battalion's BOSS representative to provide a program overview to the new commander. This overview provides key perspective on the concerns of the unit's single Soldiers.

## Conclusion

In conducting research for this article, I observed there is no widely used checklist for the execution of a battalion-level change of command (many books and checklists exist for company-level changes of command). Most resources focus only on the proper procedures for conducting the battalion-level change-of-command ceremony itself. It is my hope that this article, and the checklist provided, can help future battalion and squadron staffs better prepare to conduct the whole change of command well, not just the ceremony.

New battalion commander's checklist	Go/No-go
Staff conducts MDMP on change-of-command "operation"	
Schedule command-climate survey	
Tour post facilities (Range Control, simulations center, etc.)	
Experience all weekly battle-rhythm events	
Receive introduction/brief from all shops/specialties	
Receive introduction/briefs from all subordinate units at their headquarters	

Staff plans/resources change-of-command ceremony	
Meet battalion families	
Meet FRG leaders	
Counsel subordinates and view counseling of subordinates	
Counsel subordinate units' property-accountability procedures	
Schedule new commander counseling with brigade commander	
Receive SHARP/EO programs in-briefs	
Receive overview of non-deployable roster	
Update battalion policy letters	
Order more battalion coins	
Schedule visits with other battalion commanders	
Schedule visit with brigade command sergeant major	
Tour barracks and motorpool	
Receive overview of BOSS program	

**Figure 1. Battalion-level change-of-command ceremony checklist.**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Army establishes U.S. Army Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention Academy," Washington, DC, Sept. 8, 2014, [www.army.mil](http://www.army.mil).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. Gannon, editor, *The Battalion Commander's Handbook*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1996, available at <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/bchandbook.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 2.** LTC Chad R. Foster and CSM Dean J. Lockhart case the unit's colors during the deployment ceremony for 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, at Fort Carson, CO, May 7, 2015. *(Photo by SPC Analaura Polanco)*



**Figure 3.** MG Paul LaCamera passes the unit colors to LTC Chad R. Foster during the change-of-command ceremony for 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, at Fort Carson, CO, May 7, 2015. *(Photo by SPC Analaura Polanco)*