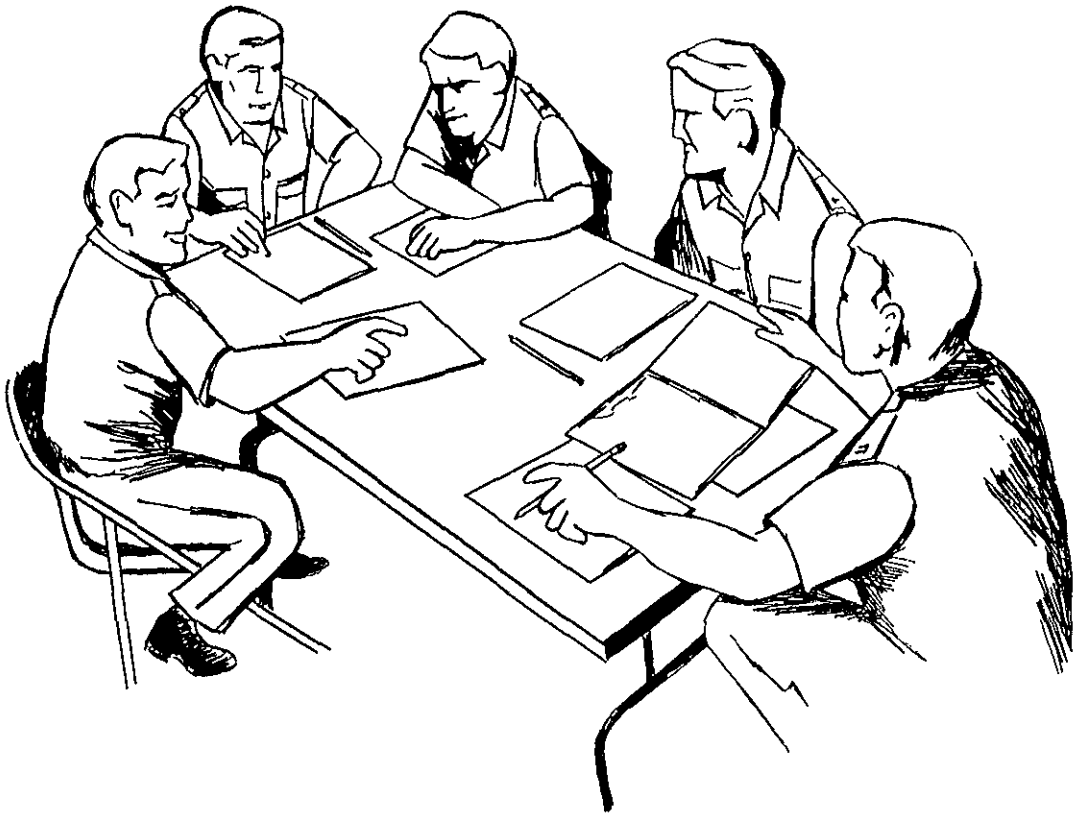


ON BEING A STAFF OFFICER

MAJOR FREDERICK ZILIAN, JR.

It seems that staff officers have never been truly appreciated. In fact, General George S. Patton, Jr., has been credited with (or blamed for) describing staff officers as "unresponsive, cool, calm, and as damnably composed as a concrete post ... without charm or the friendly germ," but "happily, they never reproduce and all of them finally go to hell."

But quite ironically, Patton could not have been the great commander that he was without competent, dedicated staff officers supporting him. A commander in today's Army, given the scope and sophistication of his responsibilities, absolutely must have solid staff officers to act as his eyes, ears, and voice.

Although there are some principles and techniques that can help a staff officer do a good job, ultimately, his success depends on his ability to work with people. And this is not something that can be defined by precise rules. In fact, being a good staff officer is essentially an art, the techniques of which must be studied and practiced.

The following advice is offered — out of experience — to those of you who are about to become staff officers of an infantry battalion or who may become battalion staff officers some time in the future. It should serve, at least, to guide your thinking as you prepare to tackle such an assignment.

First, as a staff officer, your job is to make things happen for your commander — you are an extension of him, because he obviously cannot be everywhere all of the time. Once you understand what your commander wants or, in his absence, what you sense that he would want, you must be bold and imaginative enough to see that what he wants done gets done.

A beginner at staff work sometimes sees the preparation of a piece of paper — an operations order, a letter of instruction, or a short memorandum — as an end in itself. But such a piece of paper is only a means to an end. Action is the real end — moving troops to and from a training area, conducting a withdrawal under pressure,

executing a change of command ceremony, or conducting a dining-in. Paperwork only carries instructions. (It has been said that leadership is 5 percent issuing instructions and 95 percent seeing that they are carried out.)

Unless the action is something you can do yourself, you will have to supervise others in doing it, others who may misinterpret, ignore, or, because of the press of other demands, simply forget about those beautiful pieces of paper you have prepared. This means that to accomplish the action you must, by your own energy and intervention at key points and places, ensure that people understand what is required and take the proper action. Flow charts and fancy briefings supplement but do not replace individual energy and attention.

Keeping track of all the pieces of paper and all the actions they are supposed to trigger is no simple task. It requires, first, the efficient use of time. For a staff officer especially, there are always more things to do than time in which to do them.

Some time during the day — logically at the beginning or the end — you should make a list of the things you must do. Next, you should identify the most important items on the list and make these the A's. Then you should label the next most important group the B's, and, finally, make those of lesser importance the C's.

What criteria should be used to determine the "hot" from the "not-so-hot"? If your commander or a general officer has directed that something be done — no matter how insignificant it may look — that's an A. If your executive officer (XO) has given you a requirement, if a subordinate commander has requested something, or if something left unattended may cause embarrassment to your unit, you probably should designate it an A, too. Do your best to act on these A's and respond within 24 hours, sooner if possible.

Certain routine actions from higher headquarters, such as reviewing a TOE that may never take effect, are B's, not A's. They must be done, of course, but not with the same energy or attention as other more urgent actions. You should quickly and readily delegate these B actions to your subordinates, and you should freely request extensions of the suspense dates on them.

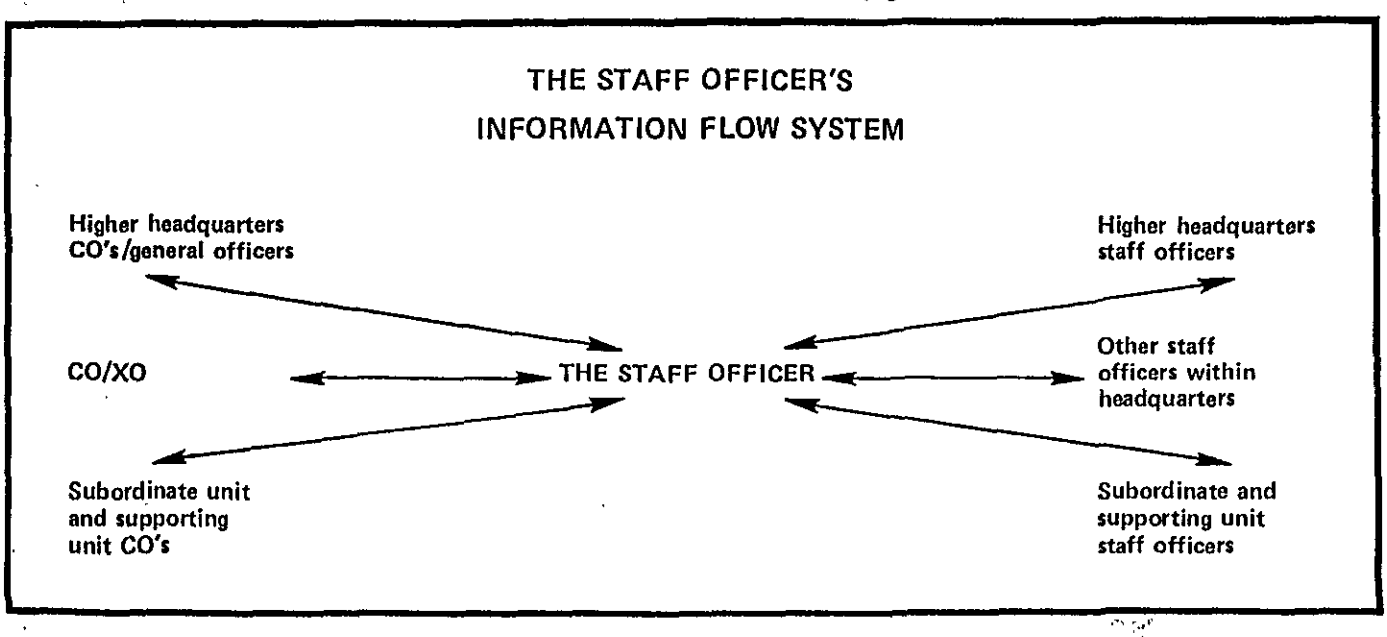
EASIER

You may be tempted to do the C's first, because generally they are easier and may not require any political maneuvering — such as confronting someone from higher, lower, or adjacent headquarters whose objectives conflict with yours. It's certainly easier to draft a letter of appreciation or to lay on some ranges than to resolve a question over which unit gets the single slot this month for the Primary Leadership Course.

But don't let the routine stuff slow you down. Leave the C's for last. Concentrate instead on the A's, and lean into them with all you have. Try not to call it quits each day until all the A's are taken care of or until you have done all you feel you can and someone else must do something before you can act further. If you do this, you will feel better, sleep better, and probably have a good answer for your commander when he asks you about a particular action the next day.

Whether you are dealing with A's, B's, or C's, though, the efficient flow of information to everyone involved is an important part of your job. Collectively, the staffs of a line unit make up this flow system (as shown on the accompanying diagram.) For the system to work smoothly, everyone must get the proper information to the proper people at the proper time. Failure to do this causes such problems as shortages, missed meetings, and crash suspenses.

When a piece of information comes in, you should quickly determine who needs to know it. More important, you should ask yourself whether your commander needs to know it. And if so, when? Always remember that good news does not get any better with age, while bad news may get worse.



If the information you get needs further refinement at your headquarters, refine it and get it out again. This is especially important if it is being passed to a subordinate headquarters; you should give that headquarters as much time as you can to work on the problem. Remember, too, the units that are supporting you: they can provide that support only if they are kept informed.

Be wary of the inclination, especially when you are new, to put an unfamiliar action back into your "in" box until tomorrow. Before you put it off, call higher headquarters, ask your XO, or check with your own people about it to make sure it is not an A matter.

An important part of this information flow is listening, and a good staff officer must excel at it. This does not mean simply hearing — you must actively consider what you hear and identify its implications for you and your unit.

To whom do you listen? Obviously, to your commander and XO. That's easy. What takes energy, discipline, and dedication is listening to others as well. For instance, if you hear that your boss's boss would like to see something happen, or if he has shown concern about something, your antenna should pick that up. If your commander does not come to you about it, raise the question with him and state any ideas you may have about it. Then get his guidance and take action.

Listen to the subordinate commanders, too. What are

their concerns and needs? How can you help them? If these commanders are not quite sure themselves what they want, you should help them clarify it.

In addition to these commanders, listen to your counterpart staff officers at higher and lower headquarters. What is on their minds? What is coming up soon? Ideally, by asking such questions, you can identify problems and work them out before they explode in your commander's face.

Finally, listen to your fellow staff officers. What are they doing that you need to know about? Conversely, what are you working on that is relevant to them?

Being an active, energetic, and disciplined listener helps you, and, therefore, your commander, stay on top of things — instead of having them stay on top of you — and it allows you to maintain good working relationships with subordinate units and higher headquarters.

While you are fighting on a day-to-day basis to accomplish those A matters, you must also take the time to look to the future. Force yourself to look at next week's SQT testing, at next month's Division Sports Day, and at the mortar platoon's out-of-area training four months from now. Are there any last-minute equipment problems with the SQT testing? Has the inclement weather plan been coordinated for it? Do all the subordinate units understand their responsibilities for Division Sports Day? Are there any problems with their upcoming in-process-review briefing for the commander? Has the air transportation been laid on for the mortar platoon's out-of-area training? Who will provide the ammunition — your unit or the unit hosting the platoon?

Usually, only fairly easy actions can be accomplished in one day. An action of any significance may require care and nursing over an extended period of time. Be sure to give each action the appropriate care at the appropriate time, checking and double-checking to see that the word is out and there are no misunderstandings.

Never, if there is any time at all, rely solely on oral communications and taskings. Always follow these up with a piece of paper repeating what is required or what has been said. This helps eliminate misinterpretations. Then continue to double-check either personally or through the members of your staff section on how the sub-tasks necessary for the entire action are being accomplished.

Closely related to this follow-up is the requirement for completed staff work. You must make every effort to submit to your commander a completed package on an action. If the final action will require him to make a decision, present him with all the information that is relevant to that decision. Ask yourself what questions your commander is likely to ask about the issue. If you do not have the answers to those questions, you are not ready to brief him or to submit the decision package to him.

You may be tempted, especially at first, to take problems instead of solutions to your commander. But you must resist that temptation. You should give him at least one solution to any problem; better still, you should offer him a range of alternatives.

Another part of completed staff work involves the less important, less glorious dimensions of an action — all those C's on your priority list. When a training exercise is over, for example, and the strokes and slaps have been handed out, the after-action reports and letters of appreciation still have to be written. Get those done as quickly and as professionally as possible, and move on to the next challenge.

THE BIG PROJECT

When faced with a big project — such as administering an ARTEP to a subordinate unit, conducting a major

COMMON MILESTONES
FOR BIG PROJECTS

Prepare the concept.
Brief the commander on concept; receive his guidance.
Conduct coordination meetings throughout the planning stage.
Prepare the final concept and brief the commander on it.
Conduct the action.
Conduct an after-action review.
Prepare the after-action report and letters.

field training exercise, or conducting a change of command ceremony — there are some principles that can help you complete the project systematically and professionally.

For such a project, it is absolutely essential that you draw up a list of milestones, things to be accomplished by a certain date. And once these milestones have been approved, you should do your best to complete each action on time. There are a number of milestones that commonly go into a "big project," such as those on the accompanying list, but you have to decide what is appropriate for each project.

First, draw up a concept using your own experience and imagination, the ideas of your staff, any information available in the files, and any guidance your commander may already have given you. Then brief the commander and the XO on your concept and receive their guidance.

During the planning process, in addition to coordinating continually with all concerned, you will probably want to have at least an initial and a final coordination meeting with everyone connected with the project. Keep your commander (and your fellow staff officers) informed on your progress and on any problems that require his personal intervention.

Brief your commander on the final plan and bring up and resolve any outstanding issues. (You may want to invite all the commanders involved to this briefing, too.) See that your graphic aids are straight, and consult your commander concerning a subsequent briefing for his boss, if necessary. Then put it all on paper in the form of an operations order, a letter of instruction, or whatever is appropriate, and distribute it.

STAFF MEETINGS

Staff meetings are an important part of the continuing coordination process, provided they are used properly. One rule you should observe is never to use a staff meeting either to conduct business with a single fellow staff officer or to confront another staff member on a point of disagreement. Trying to do these things during a meeting not only wastes the time of the other staff members, it also unnecessarily airs dirty laundry before the entire staff, and this can eventually lead to a deterioration in staff cohesion. If you have a problem with another staff member, it is better to hash it out privately.

It is imperative, in fact, that you strive to maintain good relationships at all levels. You must especially establish and maintain a good relationship with your commander and your XO. If you cannot, someone — guess who? — will probably have to leave.

You need to pay attention, especially, to your relationship with the headquarters company commander, recognizing that there is an inherent conflict between your job and his. You must, therefore, make all efforts to nurture a spirit of mutual support and respect. He needs the troops to accomplish his requirements — range firing, winter driver training, and physical training — and you need them if your staff section is to function properly. But through communication and accommodation the two of you can manage these conflicting demands effectively.

All of the ideas and advice included here so far are on the practical level. But being a battalion staff officer also involves a higher philosophical level. Like a mother's, a good staff officer's work is never done. And often you may feel that that long, hard work is not justly recognized either. How do you cope with that?

You take a deep breath and try to remember what really counts. Professionally speaking, this must be the soldier down at the lowest level of the unit. So, at the end of a day when nothing seemed to go right, when your priorities were all mixed up, try to remember the good you did, or tried to do, for the individual soldier. If you feel you did not succeed today, well — you did your best. And besides, you did succeed yesterday and will succeed again tomorrow.

Don't listen to the voices of fear or intimidation. Listen only to the voices of success and the winning spirit. You, your unit, and your family will suffer if you do otherwise. Our country asks us to do our very best, but it is pointless to worry over whether that is good enough.

Finally, expending too much physical and mental energy on the job may actually decrease your overall effectiveness. So, if you work hard, you should also play hard. As in almost anything else, balance is the key.

If you learn all these lessons and apply them well, you should be able to keep all your A projects on schedule and clean up the B's and the C's at the same time. Once you and the rest of the staff have had a few successes at completing the commander's projects, the winning spirit should take over. Then the pride and efficiency that usually result from good staff relationships will make your work much more pleasurable and rewarding.

MAJOR FREDERICK ZILIAN, JR., now a staff officer in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Department of the Army, formerly served as S-3 of the 3d Brigade, 2d Infantry Division, in Korea. He has also served as a battalion motor officer, a company executive officer, and a company commander with the 8th Infantry Division in Germany. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he holds a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University.