

Managing Functional Areas

MAJOR GARY W. ANDERSON, United States Marine Corps

A functional area manager at battalion level has a difficult job. He has to satisfy all the people above him who have anything to do with his functional area, and at the same time supervise all those below him who have the same functional area as an additional duty.

The problem with additional duties is that they are just that—additional. A harassed lieutenant or captain may have at least four or five additional duties. The sad fact is that although few aspiring young officers are relieved of duty in peacetime for tactical incompetence, many run afoul of the system because they cannot handle the intricacies of postal matters or electronic warfare.

To all of you who are functional area managers, therefore, I offer the following principles—principles that have come from my experience as a functional area manager and a supervisor of such managers. My observations are presented from a lieutenant's point of view, for this is where these battles are either won or lost.

The first thing you should consider on assuming an additional duty is that somewhere in the chain of command there is an officer who has that job as his primary duty and who spends his entire time worrying about that job. This means, of course, that you as a functional area manager—albeit as an additional duty—must be prepared to make that additional duty the most important thing you do for a stipulated time each week.

Accordingly, you are well advised to establish an early relationship with the folks up the line who ultimately will do the inspecting of that area in your unit. Your interest and concern will be your best assets in establishing your credentials.

Find out all you can about your functional area. Ask for a courtesy inspection as soon as you take over. This does two things. First, it makes your immediate supervisors in that particular functional chain a part of any problem you may have. Second, and most important, it gives you a place from which to start.

If you find your area is in good shape, you can start a program to keep it that way. But if your initial inspection is unfavorable, let your boss know quickly. Although you can't be blamed for the problem, you will be held responsible for what comes next. If you need help, ask the commander or XO for it now; on the other side of all this, make sure your report comes complete with your plan to remedy the situation. No one, particularly a leader, likes to hear unvarnished bad news; your job is to make the news better.

CHECK SOPs

Next, check on the way your functional area is handled in your battalion's SOP. (Every functional area has orders and SOPs that pertain to it.) It is amazing how many battalions come to grief because they did not conform to their own SOPs. This is usually caused by pure laziness. Writing and updating an SOP is a pain in the neck, and the easy way out is to take an SOP from the next higher unit and change the names to match your unit. This is easy — until you find that you have directed yourself to maintain equipment and conduct training that your unit doesn't rate or need. It gets worse when you are gigged on an inspection for failing to comply with your own directive. So be sure to review your unit orders and

SOPs. If you can't conform to your own directives, change them to reflect reality, if directives from higher headquarters will allow it.

Remember, too, that sound documentation is your only way of demonstrating that you are conducting the classes, briefings, or whatever is needed to keep your unit current in its skills as they relate to your functional area. And don't forget to document concurrent training that relates to your area — documenting the amount of time your unit spends exercising in NBC gear, for example, will help show a pattern of attention to such training. (Needless to say, everyone concerned should keep a copy of all such documents in his files.)

As a battalion level functional area manager, you may feel that you are at the end of the world. If so, imagine what life is like for your company level subordinate managers. If a particular functional area is a secondary duty for you, it may rank third for them. This can present a real leadership problem for you, because in supervising them you must compete with a number of other demands, and you cannot monopolize their time to the detriment of their primary duties. Your supervisory activity, then, is best accomplished by a combination of the carrot and stick approaches. Praise these officers or NCOs in front of their company commanders when they do well. Conversely, give them an opportunity to make things right before you report them for the things they don't do well.

Above all, remember that your area probably is not the only thing that is placing a demand on their time; in fact, it may be a fairly minor one. It will become major only if something goes radically

...rong, and your job is to see to it that nothing does go that wrong. In the world of functional area management, delegating isn't necessarily a virtue.

Make certain that you know — or learn — your business. If you had to take over your additional duty without having any experience with it, rectify the situation as soon as possible. Attend a school if you can. If you can't, take a correspondence course. If all else fails, learn fast on the job. As a minimum, know how to do preventive maintenance, teach relevant classes, and use equipment.

Develop a plan for attaining unit objectives within your area, and keep some milestones. For instance, two weeks before a major inspection or tactical exercise is not the time to begin squaring away your area. Everyone should know what the milestones are; your commander, your senior functional manager, and your subordinates should all be helping you move in that direction. If you fall behind, ask for help. Make everyone part of the problem; then they will have to become part of the solution.

Now we come to the payoff — the inspection. If you haven't followed the principles outlined thus far and your inspection is tomorrow, this part won't help

you. On the other hand, if you have a good area, this will help you present it in the best possible light.

Many good units get marginal inspection grades because they organize poorly for inspections. You'll get good grades if you apply these principles:

- Find a quiet area in which to lay out your presentation. Don't end up flailing around in your own office with the telephone and other distractions. Lay on a conference room or classroom well in advance.

- Prepare the presentation. Lay it out in exhibit format using the inspection checklist. (Almost all inspections have one.) And have it all together. Don't look disorganized by running around during the inspection looking for odd pieces of documentation.

- Never make the same mistake twice. Review all previous inspection reports—you can be sure the inspector has. Make sure you have corrected any previous problems. If you haven't completely solved them, document what you have been doing toward that goal.

- Don't argue with the inspector. Any good inspector will look closely at what you've been doing, and will give you the courtesy of a thorough inspection. If he

nitpicks, you are probably in good shape. This means he is having to work hard to find problems. But if he finds problems when he looks at your first exhibit, you're in big trouble. Don't make it worse by antagonizing him.

None of these inspection tips will make an unsatisfactory unit satisfactory, but they can help you put the final touches on weeks or months of hard work. Your value to your unit in combat may revolve around your tactical proficiency, but you'll never get to that point if you are relieved in peacetime for failing a brigade career-planning inspection. Success as a functional area manager will help you develop a reputation for competence that will serve you well throughout your career.



Major Gary W. Anderson, a U.S. Marine Corps infantryman, has served as a platoon commander, company commander, and battalion staff officer. He holds a master's degree from Pepperdine University and has written numerous articles for publication in various military journals.

Your First Assignment

MAJOR ERIC E. HOLDEMAN

For most officers, their first assignment is a time when their learning curve is at its peak—a time when they formulate their basic conceptions of what the Army is or is not; how it operates; and how they operate within it.

That first assignment is indeed different from all the other assignments an officer can expect to have during his military career. Never again will he experience the frustrations and successes that come from being a newly commis-

sioned officer. And as the initial weeks and months grow into years, his "military personality" will develop.

Recognizing the fact that a great deal of literature is already available to guide young officers who are willing to read it, the ideas and thoughts set forth in this article represent only a few of the guideposts some of my acquaintances and I have found to be particularly helpful. We hope that the young infantry officers who are now facing their first assignments will

find them helpful, too. I therefore address the following advice directly to them.

As a leader, your mission, of course, is to lead soldiers. But the first principle of leadership is knowing how to follow. Giving orders is easy; taking them can be difficult. The example you set for your subordinates in executing the directives given to you can be an unspoken testimony to the esteem in which you hold the Army as a way of life. Your attitude