
Simple Ideas

For the New Platoon Leader

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New platoon leaders have access to many references that deal with leadership, tactics, and training, and as a new platoon leader, you should look at as many of these sources as possible. The more you know, the more options you will have available.

This article, however, is meant to provide a few lessons and ideas that may be overlooked. Some of these are on leadership, but the rest are simple ideas that will make your job easier.

First, keep a file of all your orders. Most officers do this, and the best way is in a hardcover notebook so that your documents are organized and accessible. This book should include assignment orders, award orders and certificates, officer evaluation reports (OERs), and any other document that might go in your military file. Keeping this file in a chronological order makes it easy for you to find a specific record at a specific point in your career.

Along the same lines, keep a file of all documents that you produce. Every award, evaluation report, Report of Survey, Line of Duty Investigation, OER Support Form, and any other document that you write should be kept in a file. You will find yourself continually using these documents.

This file is important for two reasons.

First, you have a copy in case the document you produced is lost at higher levels. Second, and more important, you have a reference from which you can take ideas. Writing an evaluation report or award is much easier if you have examples to follow. This file should be paper copies of the original documents in something as simple as a manila folder. Saving documents on computer is fine but not as convenient as actual paper copies. A paper copy can be referenced instantly by anyone who needs to use it as an example.

One of the first things you should do when you arrive at your unit is to check out your entire battalion area. Most units have sponsors to show new personnel around. You need to take a look at all the battalion's facilities, inside and out. Look around the battalion headquarters, S-4 shop, motor pool, dining facility, Aid Station, and every other place that may directly or indirectly affect your platoon.

While doing this, meet the soldiers who work there. The Physician's Assistant, S-4, Motor Sergeant, PAC NCO, and the chiefs of many other areas, will all somehow affect your platoon, and you should be able to put a face to each place. This way, when someone says "the PAC NCO says..."

or "the S&T Platoon Leader needs...", you have a true idea of where and who he is talking about. They, in turn, will be able to connect your face and name more easily. For the same reason, on a larger scale, you need to learn as much about your post as possible as soon as you can.

Your additional duties will also be an important part of your job. NBC officer, Arms Room Officer, Weight Control Officer, Safety Officer, and the dozen other possible additional duties may seem relatively unimportant to the success of a rifle platoon. But these duties are very important to the success of the company and surprisingly important for a platoon leader to learn. You have the opportunity to develop your professional knowledge by learning in the company and by attending related schools or courses, such as the NBC course. As a platoon leader you may get by at first with limited knowledge of the commodity areas and additional duties. But the more you learn about company operations as a platoon leader, the less you will have to learn as an executive officer or commander. Executive officers, and especially commanders, have to know about the additional duty areas to keep the company running smoothly. If you take the

time to learn your additional duty areas, your company will be better off. And in the long run, so will you and your platoon.

Whenever you must take a problem to your commander, also try to offer him a solution as well. The commander has enough to think about without having to solve every single problem. Have solutions to problems ready, and be prepared to make recommendations about training, personnel, military justice punishments, and other matters that come up. The commander is likely to accept your recommendations or solutions, or with some slight modification, most of the time. This gives you greater freedom to lead your platoon and make your own destiny. If your commander does not accept your recommendations, support his decision and continue to offer solutions to other problems and issues. As long as your recommendations are doctrinally sound and tactfully presented, you are doing your job.

Upon completion of the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) and the Ranger Course, you will have the base of knowledge about tactics and leadership that you need to become a rifle platoon leader. Believe in what you know, and trust your instincts. If something doesn't look right to you, it probably isn't.

Don't allow your soldiers to continue doing things the wrong way, especially if they say, "This is the way we've always done it here." As a recent graduate of IOBC and possibly the Ranger Course, you should know the newest doctrine. You will probably meet resistance to changing techniques that have always been done a certain way, especially from those who have been in the unit for a long time. Explain that tactics and techniques have changed and why a specific technique has changed, and back the changes with the appropriate manuals.

You should not, however, go into a platoon and try to change everything right away. If changes are necessary, focus on the major issues first. Once you have gained the trust of your soldiers, it will be easier to make changes. The important thing to remember is, do not be afraid to make corrections.

Again, so long as you make valid corrections tactfully and on the basis of current doctrine, there should not be any ill feelings.

Remember that there are many things you still need to learn, especially about your platoon's equipment. Asking questions is as important as making corrections. The SINCGARS radio, the precision lightweight GPS receiver, and numerous pieces of NBC equipment all may have been discussed briefly in IOBC, but you certainly will not know everything you need to know about them. If you go to a mechanized unit, the Bradley course certainly won't teach you all you need to know about the vehicle. And, if you become a specialty platoon leader, such as mortar or TOW, there is a whole new realm of equipment to learn. Ask your soldiers questions about the equipment and show them that you want to learn. This way, you not only learn the equipment, but also open the communications flow within the platoon.

As a leader, it is your job to ensure that you and your soldiers are performing assigned tasks to standard. It is important that your subordinate leaders know exactly what needs to be done. One of the easiest and most effective ways to ensure that tasks are being accomplished is to create, and use, checklists.

Checklists are important for your leaders to have as a reference. In the heat of a busy day, it is easy to overlook a task or two, even for an experienced squad leader. To ensure that all the steps of a task are being done, a quick reference such as this is more convenient to use than a manual.

Checklists can easily be part of a platoon standing operating procedures (SOP). Checklists for priorities of work, pre-combat inspections, and maintenance checks can easily be reduced to pocket size. And such checklists are a simple way for subordinate leaders to ensure they are meeting your standard.

One leadership lesson I want to discuss is the need to develop trust. A platoon leader must trust his NCOs and soldiers—and in turn earn their trust—so he can develop a strong team. But

how do you develop trust? You have to listen to the recommendations of your NCOs and soldiers. This does not mean that you have to accept every suggestion. The final decision is ultimately yours. But you open the communications flow by listening to and implementing some of the techniques and ideas of your soldiers. Your NCOs and soldiers should feel comfortable making suggestions and offering ideas. They should feel comfortable asking questions that clarify your intent. This is a great asset, whether planning training or planning a mission. Trust builds loyalty. Loyalty and trust together build a team.

Along with listening to the recommendations of your soldiers, learn about them. Learn who they are and tell them about yourself. Let them know that you are interested in them and care about what they have to say. Your soldiers should follow you into battle, not because they know that you are the platoon leader, but because they know you are competent and you care about them.

The final lesson is the importance of professionalism. You must always try to maintain your military bearing. Your professionalism is always being measured. Always try to control your emotions. Think before you speak. Be consciously aware of who is around you. Control your body language (a facial expression can say as much as the spoken word). Use good judgment when making decisions. And never compromise your integrity. You can recover from tactical errors in training. That is why we train. But it is very difficult to recover from errors in judgment that reflect on your professionalism.

All of the ideas presented in this article are fundamental to our profession. These are certainly not all of the things that you need to succeed as a platoon leader. But the information will make your job somewhat easier and will better prepare you and your platoon for combat.

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