

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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I've passed! What's left to learn?

A Section Commander in Queen's Division

The short answer to this question is everything! However, arriving at this humbling realisation can in my experience be an unnecessarily painful journey. This need not be the case if we are willing as JNCOs to talk more readily about our mistakes and share our learning and experience more broadly so that others might progress more efficiently on their own leadership journey. As way of introduction and to provide some context, I have served for just over 8 years with the Infantry. More than half of that time has been as a JNCO with an even split across Rifle and Support Companies (Snipers). I have attended numerous professional courses including the Section Commanders Battle Course (SCBC), the Platoon Sergeants Battle Course (PSBC) and deployed on Op HERRICK. In this Insight, my first written piece on leadership, I will seek to share my experience with some thoughts on what I believe are the key challenges faced by newly qualified or promoted NCO's and how to embrace them rather than see them as a barrier. I will focus on three areas: Development, Humility and Vision and hopefully highlight how they integrate with one another.

Development

What do we mean by this? I am talking about this not just from a personal perspective but also with regards the development of others too. Be under no illusion that passing any battle course, or any other promotional course for that matter, is a great achievement and you should of course be extremely proud of yourself – but it doesn't end there. These courses have given you a foundation, but it is just a foundation, which you now need to build on to become the leader or commander you both want to be and are expected to be. At this point do not fall short by thinking that because you have passed the course you know everything. In fact treat this as the opposite and that this is just the start of your own learning on this phase of your journey. I would suggest leaning heavily on those around you and asking questions. You need to observe those you respect; how they teach, how they lead, how they utilise discipline and reward and importantly how they inspire and encourage others. Take all of what you feel, and see, is good and add it to your own leadership 'arsenal'. Don't be afraid to tweak and change things to suit you and your character, that's what development is all about. Identify what makes a better you and apply it!

What next? Well, look at all those around you to see what they offer, both those of the same rank and those who you now lead. They will look to you for decision-making, but they will also have some pretty impressive ideas themselves. It is your job to develop those individuals and ideas as much as you are prepared to develop yourself. Aim to become the person they want to learn from first, then encourage and support them to take ownership of their development as much as you are. There are lots of opportunities and mechanisms out there for development, whether it be a course through the military education services or getting them to utilise wider opinion and experience in an article such as this one. Reading, discussing and thinking about themselves as a leader and the topic of wider leadership can only be a good thing. Encouraging them to add to the military social media debate (in a considered and constructive way), which is gathering some real momentum and offers a voice will add real value to both personal and team development so use it!

Humility – BE HUMBLE!

If there is one thing I think every junior commander should be taught or should learn it is understanding the difference between confidence and arrogance and how this fine line can either make or break someone becoming a good leader. Of course, be confident in yourself and

your ability, always, but also remain grounded in remembering where you have come from and how to appreciate the experience of others. This means never thinking you are above learning and development of yourself. It also means be prepared to take criticism, understand the value it offers and how you can use it to your advantage to become a better you.

As a newly promoted LCpl, I can openly admit that I fell well short of such humility and I reference this failing regularly when I speak to those I find myself responsible for. I was very fortunate to fall under the guidance of a very capable and experienced Cpl, who quickly identified this short coming and informed me 'The minute you learn how to be humble, will be the minute you've realised you've missed out on a lot of learning' (this was amongst other things that were said at a volume that would, in this modern army, require hearing protection). He was completely right, I had considered myself 'fully learned' and therefore had already missed out on countless opportunities to continually improve. I can't stress it enough but be humble and actively encourage humility in those around you and you will undoubtedly surround yourself with, and foster the development of honest, highly motivated individuals of all ranks. In turn they will work relentlessly to make each other better for the benefit of the team and for the wider vision.

Vision

This is a term I would often hear as a JNCO but never give much attention too. However, I believe if it is broken down into situational awareness, goals and understanding then it makes more sense and is also a helpful tool to achieve as a JNCO.

- **Situational awareness (and not just operationally).** I love this phrase, because it is important but succinct. I think it hones us as JNCOs to consistently think about what you are part of, where you are and what you are there to do. This requires you to be interested in the purpose of your organisation and the part you play so if you don't really understand this you need to ask some questions and keep asking until you get an answer that makes sense and is simple enough for you to explain to others. Once you understand this you will more readily think what effect your decisions will have on achieving this purpose and on other people? Always remember, regardless of what you are doing, where you are doing it or who you are doing it with that we all fight for the same side and your actions can impact on this. Always think, So What?

- **Goals.** Now that you are thinking about situational awareness consider how you are going to achieve, both individually and as a team. Identify the strengths and weaknesses in each of your soldiers and then use the former and develop the latter. Give your soldiers goals and challenges but importantly align expectation with ability to underpin and sustain motivation and make them relevant to the overall goal. Finally, encourage and support your soldiers in achieving them.
- **Understanding.** Fully understand your own role. What is your job role both in camp and on operations? Make an honest assessment of where you don't meet the mark, where are your gaps? Once you have done this you can make sure your development plan works towards making you better at your job and plugging these gaps. Make sure everyone you are responsible for also understands their role and has a development plan towards achieving it. This will help instil some daily purpose in what they are doing and help situate or mitigate the menial tasks that also get thrown into the mix by the Army.

These are my three key areas for thought as a JNCO to improve your ability and hopefully avoid my early mistakes. In summary, lead by example, actively consider the development of not just yourself but your soldiers, understand the purpose you are part of and the role of you and your soldiers in supporting this. Finally, but no less important always, always seek and foster humility wherever and whenever you can. I will give the final word to one of my CSMs:

'If we spend all our time looking up, how do we ever build from the bottom.'

Questions

1. What three leadership lessons would you pass on to one of your newly promoted peers?
2. What are the gaps in your development? What type of gap are they (physical, technical, leadership, personal, etc)? What is your plan to address this?
3. Could you simply articulate the vision and purpose of your organisation and your role in achieving it? If not how can you resolve this?
4. What simple steps could be implemented in your organisation to foster humility?

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