

Christian Leadership for the Junior Officer
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Disclaimer: What follows is not intended as the final word on leadership. Rather, I wish to encourage further discussion.

In order to be successful as a junior leader at your first unit, there are core elements you might want to think about before you arrive. You will need each of these, and I have listed them in increasing order of priority, from least to most important.

1. **Hard Work.** The first element you will need to be successful is the ability to work hard. It is amazing how many officers, including some Christian officers, will not or cannot work the required hours. I remember the United States Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel who spoke to my then-new freshman class at The Citadel on this subject. He articulated the familiar “Look to your left and right; one of you will not be here in a few short months...do you know why? ...Because you are lazy!” And, laziness is not all about time spent on the job. Determine to work hard whenever and wherever you work. Needing to work extra-long hours may be a sign that you are not working efficiently.

2. **Technical Competence.** When you arrive at your first unit, you should focus your attention on learning your responsibilities and the technical systems you will use. Communications systems alone will require reading and hands-on practice. For a time, put away the books on Generals Patton and Lee and the “bulletproof superhero” novels and focus on the technical aspects of your new job. Every type of unit will have high expectations of you. An airborne unit will expect you to attend Jumpmaster School. An artillery unit will expect you to pass the Gunnery Safety Exam. An Air Assault Unit will want you to graduate from Air Assault School. There are similar expectations in every service. The good news here is that your subordinates, collectively, likely already know the technical aspects of your job well and will be delighted to assist you. All you will need to do is sincerely ask for assistance and then discipline yourself to listen.

3. **Ability to Work with People.** Nothing is sadder than someone who displays the required knowledge for his or her job but lacks people skills. Do learn names—first names if appropriate. Learn something about your co-workers—where is each one from? What does each one do on his/her time off? Does he/she have a family? Again, learn to listen actively. Finally, avoid discussions concerning politics, and other “touchy” subjects, perhaps including religion, for a time.

Potential Pitfalls. While most of your NCOs will be hard working and conscientious, all are human. Here are some pitfalls you should be aware of.

-**The Usurper.** There is someone in every organization who will feel confident making decisions that are rightfully yours, usually with a smile on his face. General Colin Powell, in his book *My American Journey*, tells of one “barracks lawyer” who appointed himself the Equal Opportunity Representative in his battalion and attempted to disrupt good order and discipline. General Powell recognized the threat immediately and had the soldier reassigned.

-**The “Boomerang.”** This person is an expert at taking the task that you assign and throwing it right back to you. At first, you may not even realize the trick because it will feel so good to be so indispensable. Eventually you will burnout from exhaustion if you fail to learn how to effectively delegate and then hold people responsible. I confess that I fell for this one as a lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). After shouldering all the responsibilities for 11 extra duty areas in a major inspection, including the Supply Room and the Arms Room, I realized that I had an NCO to assist me in each area. Subsequent inspections became much easier, once I recognized and used this force multiplier. You will likely be too busy with the work that is rightfully yours to shoulder the responsibilities of others. As an added benefit, you will find it much easier to write Evaluation Reports for your subordinates.

-The Quick Decision. More than once you will be pressured to make a quick decision. Be aware that most decisions you make are not life-or-death. In other words, whenever possible, take a little bit of time before making important decisions. The Bible is full of leaders such as Nebuchadnezzar and Herod who later regretted making hasty, bad decisions. At the same time, don't labor over minor decisions. Be assertive. But do not allow yourself to be pressured. Ask questions until you are satisfied and confident of your choice.

-Sharing Your Faith. This is a sensitive area. Once you have earned the respect of your leaders, colleagues, and subordinates, do feel free to discuss your faith in Christ in a loving and respectful way. Remember though, the only thing that should ever offend is the message. Also be sure subordinates know that you will not evaluate their faith, but the quality of the job they do.

4. **Loyalty.** Give your loyalty to your boss, your organization, and your subordinates.

-Make it your goal to make your boss successful during this tour. If appropriate, write this down as part of your goals. Without ever compromising your integrity, follow through on this commitment.

-Similarly, give your loyalty to your organization. No one wants to hear you belly-ache that you didn't receive the specific assignment you asked for. Wherever you are assigned, "get into" that unit and learn all you can about the unit, the traditions, and the lore. You will be surprised how much fun you will have if you determine to do this one thing.

-Finally, give your loyalty to your subordinates. "Catch them" doing right. Convince them they are winners. Help them succeed. Walk through (expedite) their paperwork for Green-to-Gold or other programs; submit for awards frequently; always praise in public and scold only in private (for 30 seconds or less). Dr. Fred Miller, who served in senior positions for four Oregon governors told me his most important job interview question: "Tell me about five subordinate leaders you helped develop over the past five years. How did you assist them and where are they now?"

5. **Integrity.** Nothing is more valuable than a good name (Proverbs 22:1). I confess to having been very naive in this area and continue to be surprised by those, including church leaders, who sell their good name so cheaply. Of course, honesty goes for your commander, your colleagues and your subordinates. I remember as a new support officer in a Special Forces unit, briefing in error that a group of passports were "squared away" for an upcoming small element deployment. One of my subordinates briefed me in error, earlier on that busy day, as I headed for yet another meeting. In all honesty, the fault was mine because I should have been better informed, earlier. After informing the Battalion XO of my mistake, I immediately informed my Battalion Commander (now a General Officer) of my error and my plan to fix the problem. In return for a few minutes of discomfort, I gained the trust of my Commander—and I determined not to mess up again.

Note. I cannot guarantee that following these simple principles will bring you career success. Following them will allow you to serve effectively while preserving your good name. Who knows, maybe your good name will open doors for you to share your faith from time to time (I Peter 3:15)?