

The Field Grade Perspective

By COL Glenn A. Henke

Promotion to major is the most significant change most Army officers experience in their career. This is due to the dramatic change in both their responsibilities and the fundamental shift in expectations by senior leaders regarding what they should be able to accomplish. It is truly a “quantum leap” to an entirely new level, not an incremental change. To succeed, majors must develop new skills and approaches to be successful, starting with adjusting their perspective of how they approach problems. This is the “field grade perspective.”

The field grade perspective includes six elements, all of which take time and deliberate effort to develop. As a battalion and brigade commander, I discussed these elements with captains as they completed battery-level command. At this point they achieved the primary goals for company grade officers and needed to start thinking like field grade officers. The article that follows is a summary of those counseling sessions.

Element 1: The Iron Major is a real thing

To be perfectly blunt, major is one of the hardest working ranks in the officer corps (or at least it feels like it). The day-to-day responsibilities and associated “to do” lists for majors dwarf those of captains. As an Army, we simply expect more from majors. They are mid-tier professionals with a decade or more of experience, so this expectation is reasonable. The gold oak leaf is a symbol of this experience. This is not to say that lieutenant colonels and colonels aren’t working hard. They are, but most of us recognize that major marks a profound transition in workload. Senior field grade officers are usually accustomed to this workload, whereas it may come as a shock to new major.

Over the years I’ve seen some majors make the mistake of focusing on the hours they spend working. This is an error since in most cases, since we (the Senior Raters) are more interested in output, not input. I once had a major object to my assessment on his OER during rater counseling and he justified this

by saying he worked harder than any other major in his section. I simply responded that his peers who I rated higher were more effective and I wasn’t keeping timecards for the officers I rated. My expectation is that people are spending a reasonable amount of time in the office each workday and doing what is required to get results. Although we may need to surge for critical missions or urgent tasks, this should be the exception and not the rule. Additionally, I take a dim view of officers who believe working late hours is a badge of honor since this behavior takes a heavy toll on their subordinates, either in terms of workload or leader development. Meaningless busy work is bad for an organization and leaders who would rather take on everything themselves and send everyone home aren’t developing their subordinates. The notion that “it will be faster if I do it myself” is almost always a self-defeating fallacy when played out over time.

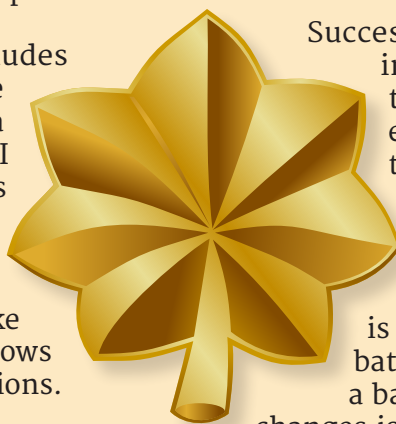
Element 2: Field Grades Have a Higher Level Systems View

Successful officers develop a knack early in their careers for building systems to organize work. Successful battery executive officers typically distinguish themselves through their use of systems.

In this sense, a system is simply a series of processes and the energy to execute them. This does not change at the field grade level. What does change is the scale and scope. The systems in a battalion are more complex than those at a battery or platoon. The other thing that changes is that a systems view must broaden to include understanding how unit systems support higher echelon units and Army-level systems.

It’s one thing to develop a system to organize Unit Status Reporting each month as a battalion executive officer. This first-order systems view is critical to success, just as it was as a battery executive officer. However, the second-order systems view is understanding how to translate mere data into a narrative that meaningfully informs Army readiness reporting. This requires the major to understand what processes and decisions the Unit Status Report informs.

Successful field grade officers are responsible for knowing how Army processes work together. This takes study and time and no officer can possibly learn them all in a career, much less as a new major. Instead, field grades must learn how to “pull the threads” on their contributions to larger systems (like Unit Status Reporting) and steadily increase their understanding of the linkages. This understanding of the larger context enhances their ability to efficiently prioritize requirements and craft better outcomes.



The Unit Status Report is an important example and one process where majors must take an early and deliberate interest. Battalion and brigade level reports aggregate at the “AA” or “FF” unit identification code, depending on the unit type. This in turn provides a quantitative measure of unit readiness for personnel, training, supply and equipment maintenance. The commander’s narrative provides the qualitative assessment and when written properly describes risk tied to time. This gives the Army and the Department of Defense the information needed to allocate resources and determine a unit’s readiness to execute missions. This is also reported to Congress. Because of this, a good major understands that Unit Status Report is fundamental to communicating genuine readiness. They can only reach this understanding with a broader systems view. They will not achieve this if they only view Unit Status Reporting as another entry in their monthly “to-do” list.

Element 3: How Do You Know What You Think You Know?

As a battalion executive officer, I was typically the first field grade leader to receive reports of a crisis or serious incident. When these reports came to me, I spent much of my time trying to figure out exactly what happened so I could turn a confusing first report into information my battalion and brigade commanders could easily understand and then make decisions, if required. The challenge was almost always tied to sourcing the information. In other words, how did the unit receive the information? Who reported to the battery-level leaders? Did they receive this information from systems of record (like GCCS-Army)? Was this an eyewitness report? Some reports included reasonable speculation on what might have happened but without acknowledging this was an unvalidated assumption. Assumptions reported as fact are typically framed as assuming something did happen because it should have happened (one of my Command Sergeants Major often said “should” was the most dangerous word in the Army). Another name for this phenomenon is “confusing the plan with the execution.” As I worked to discern the truth, most of my questions to junior leaders focused on determining how we knew what we thought we knew.

Field grade officers must deliberately develop this skill to a very high degree to have any hope of succeeding. One of the fastest ways for a major to lose credibility with their brigade or division commander is to fall short here. We expect majors to be right, which means they have already clearly defined what is known, what is unknown and what is expected or

anticipated (and then clearly telling us which one is which). If you can’t answer how you know what you think you know, then you need to ask more questions before you report. If you must report, you must clearly identify the knowledge gaps up front.

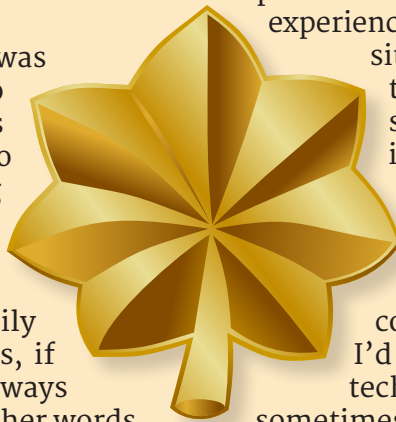
Element 4. Field Grades Have a Steady Hand

The most effective majors I served under all provided a sense of calm determination. I could go to them for advice or sometimes to vent. The best of them listened calmly and gave advice when needed. The worst of them reacted emotionally and made me reluctant to approach them in the future. When I was most effective as a major, I emulated the traits of the first group and worked to avoid the pitfalls of the second group.

Developing a steady hand is helped greatly by experience and time. Having a “not my first rodeo” mentality is certainly helpful in the day-to-day operations of units. However, no amount of experience can prepare leaders for every possible situation, so leaders must lean on other tools and techniques. Majors need skills to fall back on when experience is lacking.

One technique I’ve used with great effect is to always under-react. I learned this from a fellow battalion commander and I immediately wished I’d learned it sooner in my career. This technique is always useful; to this day, I sometimes write this on a 3x5 card and place it somewhere prominent when I find myself getting frustrated.

The second technique in developing a steady hand is to deliberately build a deep sense of organizational empathy. This empathy applies to subordinate units, adjacent units and higher headquarters. You must learn to see the situation at hand from their perspective. For instance, the late task you received may be the downstream effect of an Army Senior Leader decision in response to a change in the strategic environment; it is not always because the Brigade didn’t plan effectively. In instances where the higher headquarters is responsible for a late tasking, majors must honestly ask themselves if their own record is spotless and ask the necessary questions about what is happening that may be driving the urgency. The same principle applies to subordinate organizations; a battery is a small organization with no staff, so it should not be surprising if they miss a suspense or report something incorrectly. Majors play a role in mentoring battery commanders as well as their own staff. If we’re going to underwrite honest



mistakes, this must apply at every level of leadership, not just for you. As a brigade commander, I used my assessment of a major's organizational empathy to judge their readiness to serve as future battalion commanders.

Element 5: Relationships Are Everything

One of the great benefits of Army schools, particularly the Command and General Staff School, is the expansion of your peer group. The common Leavenworth truism of "you'll meet the people you'll work with for the rest of your career" has certainly proven accurate for me and I know my experience is not unique. Of course, officers establish professional and personal friendships at every point in their career. Every peer is a teammate and should be treated as such.

The most successful officers cultivate relationships deliberately and genuinely. The least successful are the bridge burners who excel at making enemies (or at a minimum, not making new friends and allies). This behavior typically stems from either taking a transactional view of relationships or narrowly defining who is on "their team," and these officers rarely succeed for long. Interestingly, very few officers pursuing this pathway are aware of their actions or the effects. The officers I've known who strictly define their team typically describe themselves as aggressive in pursuing their commander's goals. While this may be true, the results are still the same. Nobody roots for the jerk and most of us are reluctant to assist them unless asked directly or when that help is required for mission accomplishment (although we don't root for jerks, we still don't want to see their organizations fail). The transactional officers have similar experiences.

The Army is a team sport. Officers who understand this treat their relationships as an "end" and not a "means." Field grade officers must be able to reach outside the chain of command or organization to get things done and being a genuine person is fundamental to this skill. As the saying goes, you don't want to be exchanging business cards on the battlefield.

Element 6: You're a Teacher Now

As I reflect on my career, the most rewarding assignments were those in which I had the greatest opportunity to teach, train and mentor. We all know that leader development is essential to any

organization. The leaders who focus on this also learn that developing subordinates is the best part of their job. Major is the first rank where an officer can develop junior leaders at scale.

Two factors drive this phenomenon. First, majors possess a level of experience well above the junior leaders they encounter. A battalion executive officer usually has more than twice as many years in service as the battery commanders. Second, majors (particularly in a battalion) have a level of positional authority and span of control that gives them the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on many junior leaders. A battalion only has two majors and their authority is massive relative to their subordinates. From the perspective of many Soldiers in a battalion, majors are the most senior Army officers they routinely encounter.

This potential for good requires field grade officers to recognize their impact and consciously focus on developing subordinates. Majors should treat every engagement with junior leaders as an opportunity to teach, particularly when that junior leader is making a mistake. From this perspective, Command and Staff or Training Meetings are leader development events; it is an opportunity to train someone on the standard or share techniques. This is where micromanagers fail and leave no legacy of subordinate leaders, because micromanagement and leader development are mutually exclusive. Majors must take full advantage of their experience and teach. The unit will be better and so will the major.

Summary

The old saying that "majors run battalions and brigades" is absolutely true. While this may seem intimidating to captains getting ready to make the transition into the field grade ranks, the truth is that they will be more successful if they develop a field grade perspective. The elements of the field grade perspective described above will serve any leader well, including company grade officers. The sooner they can develop these skills the faster they will be able to lead successfully at the field grade ranks. By the time an officer pins on major rank, these skills can mean the difference between success and failure.

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