

Tips on Being a Platoon Leader

A Refreshingly Honest Account of a Junior Leader's Learning Curve

by Captain Douglas B. Crandall

Platoon leaders start from scratch. While we receive leadership training throughout the commissioning process, nothing can fully prepare us for our first day in charge. We can study to master the tactical and technical aspects of the job, but leadership experience only comes with experience. The responsibilities of the junior leader are numerous: develop subordinates, build the team, set the example, make sound and timely decisions — to name a few. Our lack of practice is no excuse. If we fail, soldiers die.

FM 22-100, Military Leadership, directs young officers to know their strengths and weaknesses and to practice honest self assessment.¹ Honest analysis of one's own failures can be difficult. The failures are many; the failures are inexcusable; the failures violate the confidence of our subordinates. As I look back, many of my own mistakes embarrass me. Nonetheless, those mistakes provide valuable insight. We must seek to improve upon them to lead more effectively in the future. Lives depend upon it.

The quandary for the new platoon leader is the virtual absence of lessons upon which to draw. There are books on leadership, and the Army publishes manuals on the subject. However, few of those sources describe the intimate details of failure — a crucial tool in learning how to lead. Therefore, I have recalled my mistakes as a platoon leader to help those who will soon tread that ground. Although the lessons are specific to my own experiences, they should not be too different from what most platoon leaders will encounter.

January 1996: Taking over the platoon. Assuming leadership of 1st Platoon, Delta Company, 1-33 Armor was the first major event of my Army career. Five years of college and four months at the Officer Basic Course all pointed to this moment. The platoon, however, could not have cared much less. While there is usually some anticipation with regard to a new leader — especially at lower levels — it is pretty much business as usual for the soldiers. Moreover, my platoon had just returned from the National Training Center. The deployment took its toll, and the platoon was ready to

rest; I was energetic and ready to get started. *Understanding the circumstances surrounding a unit that existed before me (and will exist long after me) would have put my own importance in context.*

January 1996 - April 1996: Establishing standards within the platoon. Although it is important to build credibility before making changes, some standards are simply non-negotiable. Even the most junior lieutenant understands the tenets of basic discipline. I observed but did not correct simple deficiencies: leaders who did not take the APFT with their soldiers, a tank commander who regularly came late to formations, sub-standard uniforms and haircuts. Even though the platoon appeared on a par with the company, I still should have immediately corrected these problems.

Throughout AOBC, our instructors inundated us with the mantra: "Your platoon sergeant will make you or break you." It is definitely crucial to establish a strong relationship with your resident expert. However, if you have high standards coming in, do not lower them as you attempt to build that relationship.

Many new platoon leaders will not face the challenge of immediately instilling discipline; the noncommissioned officers will have things under control; but, if the NCOs do not, it is your responsibility to enforce standards from the start.

January 1996 - December 1996: Counseling is your duty from the first day you take control of your platoon. Counsel your platoon sergeant on what you expect from him and ask him what he expects of you. Learn from him as you conduct the counseling. If he is a quality NCO, the counseling sessions will serve as professional development for you. If he is not, you will have to develop him. The bottom line is that he works for you, and you are responsible for rating his performance. You cannot properly do that without formal counseling.

I did not counsel my first platoon sergeant. The reason was simple: he was old enough to be my father. I felt inadequate. What was I, as a new second lieutenant, going to tell him? This is a typical mistake. Don't make it.

Find out quickly from your commander, the first sergeant, or the command sergeant major what goes into proper counseling, and then do it. The likely result will be a quality exchange of ideas between you and your senior NCO.

November 1996: You will make critical mistakes; drive on. My best tank commander taught me the importance of quickly recovering from failure. While preparing for a mobile defense at JRTC, I threw track. Instead of acting decisively, commandeering another vehicle, and accomplishing the mission, I stayed with my tank and reflected upon my misfortune and stupidity. After the battle was over — and we had lost — SGT Morningstar told me that I often took my mistakes too hard. In this case, he said, I had let the platoon down by not rebounding and continuing with the mission. I needed to quickly put it behind me and carry on. I will never forget that.

December 1996: Never criticize the performance of your predecessor. Following JRTC, the battalion commander chose me to take over the support platoon. Although I had heard it was a miserable job, the challenge of leading the platoon through an upcoming NTC rotation provided me with excitement. Probably the biggest mistake I made came upon my arrival to that platoon. "Right off the bat," I discussed my perception of the previous lieutenant with the platoon sergeant and some of the squad leaders.

Since that time, I have learned that there are few blunders a new leader can make which approach this one. Disparaging the previous leadership alienates those who respected their former boss. It is unprofessional at best, and springs from a lack of confidence in your own abilities. The constant need for comparison is a malady that plagues or has plagued numerous leaders — myself included. *Rid yourself of any concern for who came before you or who will come after you. Just do the job.*

As I soon found out, my predecessor had performed admirably in an extremely difficult position. It is embarrassing to think that I ever made the mistake of criticizing him.



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As a side note, complimenting your predecessor can have a proportionally opposite effect. Subtle praise for the job he did will impress subordinates and indicate that you are confident in your own abilities. I saw that quality in my battalion and brigade commanders, and I have logged it as an example of great leadership.

January 1997 - May 1997: Hold your noncommissioned officers responsible for the deficiencies of their subordinates. In many ways, I alienated my support platoon soldiers because I was too willing to correct them myself. In addition, this served to weaken the chain of command. Whenever possible, be tough on your NCOs and make **them** enforce the standards. The noncommissioned officers (squad leaders, tank commanders) are accountable to you; the soldiers are, in turn, accountable to them.

June 1997: Be with your soldiers and do not take special privileges. About half-way through our NTC rotation, SGT Kauahi, an outstanding squad leader, confronted me. The guys in the platoon felt as if I was not spending enough time with them. I had been sleeping near the Field Trains Command Post (FTCP) with the XO, CO, and ISG, instead of with my soldiers. Initially, I resented the criticism. The commander had me doing a lot of work in the FTCP, so I thought it made sense to sleep there.

When I reflected upon SGT Kauahi's comments, I realized that I had failed. My NCO was right. I belonged with my soldiers whenever possible: working beside them, communicating with them, and addressing their concerns. Taking care of soldiers is the best part of the job. Opportunities to isolate yourself and gain special privileges will arise often. Resist the temptation.

I was back with the soldiers that night and will never make the same mistake

again. *Rank has no privilege except that of caring for young lives.*

July 1997: Act decisively when you know you are right — no matter how many subordinates or peers disagree. Upon its return from NTC, the support platoon received a new platoon sergeant. Because he seemed to possess a great deal of initiative, I allowed the new platoon sergeant to make some ill-advised changes. In particular, I acquiesced to the alteration of our manning roster. I have regretted it ever since. The personnel moves reversed a tremendous amount of progress that the platoon had made.

I knew I was right; we did not need to make any changes. But similar to mistakes I made as a tank platoon leader, I allowed secondary factors to trump my better judgment. *When you know you are right, act decisively no matter who disagrees. You are the leader.*

July - August 1997: Never talk about how things have improved since you arrived. The support platoon's new platoon sergeant constantly talked about how much things had improved since he arrived — how things were now "shaping up." The rest of us thought we had done pretty well before he got there. His words proved especially embarrassing to the former platoon sergeant — a young staff sergeant who was still in the unit.

I am sure I probably made the same mistake some time in my first few months. It is a failure much like criticizing your predecessor. In effect, you are saying, "Hey! You guys are great now that I am here." Intentional or not, it causes subordinates to resent your presence. *Remember to give credit and take the blame.*

I have listed the above leadership lapses in chronological order. All of them provide perfect examples of pitfalls to avoid. While I try to reflect on each of them, there are three that I vow never to forget:

- Never criticize your predecessor
- Enforce standards from the start
- Be with your soldiers and do not take special privileges

I also learned three general lessons not directly associated with the personal disappointment of my own mistakes. They provide similar value in my quest for effective leadership.

Basic discipline is the foundation of any good unit. A quote from General George S. Patton, Jr., communicates the importance of making discipline the priority in every endeavor:

"You cannot be disciplined in great things and undisciplined in small things. There is only one sort of discipline — perfect discipline. Discipline is based on pride in the profession of arms, on meticulous attention to details, and on mutual respect and confidence. It can only be obtained when all officers are so imbued with the sense of their lawful obligation to their men and to their country that they cannot tolerate negligence."

Once you or your superiors set a standard, "perfect discipline" mandates that you enforce it. Failure to do so is a common flaw of junior officers and leads to the mediocrity of platoons and companies. One of my commanders taught me an important lesson: every time you walk by a deficiency without correcting it, you lower the standard.

Your soldiers will not always like you. Prior to taking charge of a platoon, I imagined that I would be able to enforce standards while simultaneously commanding the respect of all of my subordinates. No fantasy ended more quickly; it died for me when I read my name on the inside of a port-a-potty wall.

You must prepare to do what is right despite your soldiers' responses. A *good litmus test is to gauge the attitudes of*
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your quality noncommissioned officers. If the good NCOs respect you and follow you willingly, then you are likely striking a proper balance. There will always be those who complain and despise you — your high standards will ensure as much. (It is important to note, however, that there is a difference between enforcing standards and abstractly wielding the power of authority. Even the best leaders have their detractors, but if **no one** can stand you, then you may be the problem.)

The difference between great lieutenants and poor lieutenants is in the small things. Almost every tank platoon leader comes to the table with limited experience. Simple things delineate between those who succeed and those who fail: being on time to formations and meetings, paying attention to detail, meeting commanders' deadlines, and following established policies are good examples. It is impossible to cultivate an environment committed to basic discipline if you fail to demonstrate discipline yourself.

The single most important contributor to your performance is your attitude. Soldiers follow — and commanders desire — platoon leaders with a positive outlook. *A combination of confidence, humility, enthusiasm, and hard work will capture the attention of your platoon and guarantee your success.* A negative perspective will destroy your unit.

If I succeeded in any form, it was because of a positive attitude and a willingness to learn from my mistakes. As I indicated, I often look back on my errors with horror. However, the daunting responsibility of serving as a role model demands that we acknowledge our faults and seek self-improvement. Our soldiers deserve nothing less.

Notes

¹Department of the Army, *Field Manual 22-100, Military Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 4.

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