



The Importance of a Leader FTX

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The job of new commanders' and new first sergeants' is to develop a cohesive, mission-ready team capable of accomplishing missions across the full spectrum of operations. These challenges are compounded by the various cultures, values and norms of unit organizations. However, there are tools available to make this transition into command easier and to help move the organization in the right direction.

I found that one of the most effective tools is to conduct a leader field training exercise. This type of exercise can set the stage in presenting your command philosophy, training objectives and the way ahead for the company. Furthermore, a leader's FTX can synchronize the leaders' objectives and common operating picture with that of their subordinates. The FTX builds confidence, teamwork and cohesion while providing a unique opportunity for a company to transition into a well rounded, knowledgeable and trained unit.

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On June 1, 2009, I became a first sergeant. I worked diligently for 16 years to earn this rank and had reached a goal I set when I joined the Army in 1993. After my change of responsibility ceremony, I walked into the 172nd Chemical Company headquarters prepared to execute the duties entrusted to me. As I sat in my leather chair and looked around my office, I reflected on the great leaders I've encountered in my past. I wanted to be the best first sergeant for each Soldier within my company.

I conducted my first "close of business" formation on the Friday after I assumed the first sergeant duties. As part of the formation, I brought a .50-caliber machine gun from the arms room. I put the weapon in front of the formation and asked for volunteers. I wanted them to clear the weapon, break the weapon down and put it back together. But the platoon sergeants came forward and informed me that our machine guns had remained in the arms room without use since before any of them could remember.

For the next 90 days, I handled situations of all kinds and constantly found myself bogged down by the rigors of paperwork and Soldier concerns. However, I never forgot about that Friday. I soon learned that my objectives for this job were not going to come to fruition unless I personally made the time to accomplish them.

Therefore, I watched how the company operated. I took notes on command climate concerns, lack of discipline, leader technical and tactical competence, and a multitude of other unit situations. Then the platoon sergeants and I started to develop a plan to fix my concerns. We wanted to take every NCO to the field for three days to set the stage for success for our company. I discussed the plan with the commander. He was so in tune with our plan that he wanted to include our platoon leaders. The commander and I developed a three-day leader FTX that revolved around our command philosophy, our training objectives and the way ahead for the company.

Philosophy

Our first goal when conducting the FTX was to frame and implement a common command philosophy. First, the commander and I sat down and reflected on exactly what our expectations and goals were for the unit. We framed these expectations and goals in accordance with the “Be, Know, Do” principles. Slowly, a command philosophy started to form that captured our thoughts. We reviewed our higher headquarters’ command philosophy to ensure that it met their intent as well.

Lineage and Honors

Second, I wanted our Soldiers to take pride in our unit. I noticed in my initial observations that many Soldiers thought of our unit as a place they had to come to pass the day, and many did not take any pride in their unit.

To counter this thought process, I researched the unit’s lineage and honors. Our unit had a rich and wonderful history, but that history was unknown to our Soldiers. I captured this history on a nice plaque that the commander and I unveiled during the FTX. We ensured that being aware of this history was part of the command philosophy.

Unit Motto and Logo

Finally, the commander and I realized that our unit did not have a motto or logo. So we asked for volunteers in the company to think of potential new mottos and logos. Through a combined effort, led by the commander, our unit came up with a new motto and logo that would be the sounding board for our Soldiers in the future. During the FTX, the commander and I dedicated the evenings as a time for our leaders to come together and discuss our developed philosophy, our unit lineage and honors, and our motto. Together, these products provided an opportunity to instill pride and purpose into our unit.

Training Objectives

Another goal when conducting the FTX was to train our leaders in the unit’s Mission Essential Task List. This included individual and collective training tasks that many of our leaders overlooked when developing training. Specifically, I wanted a place away from Soldiers where I could help our leaders learn the tasks that they may have not been confident in. I kept thinking back to that Friday where our company did not have the technical knowledge of our primary weapon system. We used Day 1 and Day 2 to teach these tasks. The commander and I broke these tasks down into “shoot, move, communicate, adapt and survive.”

Shoot

For our shooting tasks, I brought out every weapon system that the unit worked with and ensured every leader could work them proficiently. In the low-stress environment during the FTX, the leaders responded well to the training and were able to admit their weaknesses to their peers. In return, those who understood the weapon systems conducted one-on-one training with those who did not.

It was amazing to see the progress our leaders made during these two days. This training was the first time I felt our leaders were developing confidence in their craft. For each training event, I personally certified every leader, including the commander. He wanted to show the other leaders that he was not above the training.

Move

For our moving tasks, I informed our leaders to leave their personal GPS at home. I taught our leaders how to use the military’s GPS along with the Blue Force Tracker system and a map. We required each leader to maneuver in their vehicles more than 50 kilometers of terrain in their vehicles and reached several checkpoints along the way. Many became lost, but we took the time to address their mistakes. Prior to the FTX, many NCOs and officers relied on their Soldiers to get them to the objective and never concerned themselves with land navigation. But after the FTX, their confidence soared once they learned how to use the systems available to them.

Communicate

Our next task was communication. We needed to ensure our company leaders could operate their radio systems. However, their initial knowledge of the radio systems was as limited as that of our shooting and moving systems. Many leaders could only operate our radios on the most basic of settings. In fact, some of our leaders did not know how to turn the radio systems on. We taught them how to build man packs, troubleshoot vehicle systems, load frequency hop and secure data, and raise antenna systems. As in the shooting and moving tasks, we

certified each leader in operating this equipment, but in a low-stress environment away from their Soldiers.

Adapt and Survive

Adapting and surviving were taught as one task. During this training, I reiterated to our NCOs and officers that many of these skills are perishable. For example, I taught them how to use hand grenade simulators, pyrotechnics, flares and smoke grenades. Many had never seen or used trip wires. I taught them how to set up triple-strand concertina wire. Finally, on the last day of the FTX, the commander and I set up a stress-fire and reflexive-fire range. Few leaders had ever participated in these types of advanced ranges. We instructed each leader how to plan, prepare and execute both ranges. In addition, we showed our leaders exactly how to train by example. Many left the ranges and the FTX feeling more confident in their craft.

The Way Ahead

Our final FTX goal was to set the stage for how our unit would function in the future. We dedicated our early mornings to discussions on this topic. This time provided the commander with a chance to focus our leaders on how to plan training. He worked with each leader, showing them how to use installation resources. In addition, he provided standards for his weekly training meetings. He showed the flaws in the current training outlines and provided a basis for future planning. I took this time to provide the framework for our daily, weekly and monthly battle rhythms. I re-introduced a monthly professional development program requirement for every leader. In addition, I discussed how our unit would

conduct promotions, Soldier and NCO of the Month boards, monthly counseling requirements, counseling packets, evaluation reports, physical fitness training, the weight control program, charge of quarters duties and a multitude of other requirements the commander and I found to be substandard.

Finally, I talked about the concerns I found during my initial 90-day observation assessment. These issues included examples of bad leadership at all levels. It also included disciplinary concerns with our Soldiers. I noticed a genuine lack of discipline within the ranks, from not saluting officers or not standing at parade rest when talking to NCOs. There were uniform concerns, haircuts out of tolerance and a failure to maintain equipment. This time provided me with the opportunity to discuss how I would operate as a first sergeant. Although not all leaders agreed with some of the foundations we laid, they did understand the way ahead for the unit.

The FTX set the stage and focused our leaders on the way ahead for the unit. It was crucial in building confidence, teamwork, cohesion and a common operating picture for our leaders. The FTX set the stage for a unique transition of our company into a well-rounded, knowledgeable and trained unit. ■

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