



Then-Staff Sgt. David Vowell (center) and members of the downed aircraft recovery team pose in Afghanistan, 2008, after successfully rigging a downed Afghan Mi-17 helicopter for sling load in. Important note, Spc. Russell S. Hercules Jr., right, did not make it home from that deployment. (Photo provided by Command Sgt. Maj. David Vowell)

Ten Things

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Having the privilege to serve as a sergeant major proves humbling every single day. I see constant reminders about things I could have done better or behaviors that were within my power to correct earlier in my career. No one is perfect and we should all strive to be better every single day. Leaning forward and digging into yourself to improve displays just one way that the Army hones and sharpens its edge.

The Army relies on its leaders, especially NCOs, to prepare any anticipated needs. The Leadership Requirements Model highlights preparing yourself on

the leading edge of “develops,” which is a competency in which all NCOs are evaluated.

For 22 years I listened to speeches about promotion potential versus actual performance, but that mentality doesn’t properly prepare Soldiers. This is especially true if their performance doesn’t outweigh their potential. They are not mutually exclusive. This is where our leaders need to challenge themselves, and as mentors we need to challenge them to get a little bit better every single day.

With that knowledge, I made a list of things I wished I knew the day I was promoted to Sergeant.

I had the opportunity to collaborate with amazing leaders across the Armed Forces, time I used to ask them for any wisdom they could provide as well. I asked for hip-pocket advice.

If you only have time to shake their hand and give them a few sentences, what would you say?

1 - It's Okay to Make Mistakes

Ofentimes we're the ones who are hardest on ourselves. Mistakes tear us up inside and can very easily burden our mental resilience. As a young sergeant, I often felt dread in the pit of my stomach for not meeting assigned deadlines or forgetting to complete an assigned task. Often, leaders would tell me to "calm down, it's all right, we'll get it done, it's not a big deal, let's go fix it," etcetera. Keep your confidence high and do the best you can on assigned tasks; if you make a mistake, learn from it. Your unit will only get better.

2 - The Need for Balance

The Army eats and eats and eats, consuming everything in its path and doesn't slow down for obstacles. Sometimes leaders are the obstacles, which reminds me of the book and movie "Mortal Engines." In it, London is a gargantuan, wheeled predator devouring everything in its path. That might be a harsh description for the U.S. Army, the mightiest organization on the planet, but it's how it feels sometimes. As individuals, we can keep up, join the warpath or get devoured and left behind.

That said, the Army is a great version of a gargantuan, wheeled predator, but the machine isn't after us, we're the ones controlling it and the chaos. Controlling the chaos requires balance though. Balance comes from sound peace of mind and control of one's emotions. Understanding your emotions and thoughtfully and deliberately sorting through them gives you the option for balance. I use the word "option" with purpose and force. Those of us who get overwhelmed with the Army have effectively chosen to be overwhelmed.

Working through your emotions, not getting swept up in the chaos, and being a proactive part of the order and purpose leads to balance. When I go to work and expect balance, regardless of happenstance, the day is always better. I am also better able to help my Soldiers and my unit. I am me, and the Army is a part of me. We must have a balance.

3 - Empowerment and Follow-Up

When leaders assign tasks, how often are they met with resistance? Common refrains

include, "I don't know how to do that" or "I've never done that before." Remind your team that historically all things were done without them being done before. Most things are possible and miracles are not often required. As leaders we don't ask for miracles, we must simply empower our Soldiers so they know how much they can accomplish.

Humans are amazing beings. I have friends who love it when they're told they can't do something. Those words fuel them to crush the world. Being able to fuel that fire in our Soldiers is what empowerment is all about.

However, empowering them is only half the battle. They also need to know you're committed throughout the entire process, and not just at the beginning and end. Let Soldiers know you plan to follow up, and then follow through. Let them teach you something. Certify them by actively participating, not by evaluating. Take part in your team's growth, they'll feel empowered by your involvement.

4 - Commitment Versus Compliance

The book "The Three Meter Zone," by J.D. Pendry, defines commitment and what it means to individuals at the lowest level. Are you committed to your current job and not the one you're going to have?

The mantra of deriving commitment versus compliance with those in your formation floats around the Army as a mantra many repeat and hold close in their philosophies. Compliance might get everyone to formation on time, but will they trust you when they need you? Commitment to each other and the shared community earns trust, and in turn, breeds loyalty to one another and the team. This effort leads to a consistent commitment to the success of the team and the community.



Then Staff Sgt. David Vowell and Sgt. Anastacio Castaneda, D Company, 4th Battalion, 159th Combat Aviation Brigade, in Afghanistan, 2009. (Photo provided by Command Sgt. Maj. David Vowell)



Then-1st Sgt. David Vowell (center left) and flight crew of Black Cat 07, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Aviation Regiment, 1st Armored Division Combat Aviation Brigade, pose in front of their aircraft. (Photo provided by Command Sgt. Maj. David Vowell)

5 - Uncross Your Arms and Take Your Hands Off of Your Hips

Put a smile on your face. Seriously. Smile. I consciously work on this every day, especially when Soldiers are around. You can see the need for approval on their faces. You don't even have to say a thing. A smile and a correction go farther than yelling and cursing at someone, it just does. Being hard on the team is not worth it, especially if you consider yourself part of it.

I feel better when I smile rather than keeping my resting scowl face. A scowl is easy and known. I feel so bad when I walk into my team's office and am met with "What's Wrong?" I then reverse course and put a smile on my face so the team knows I'm there for them and not the other way around. How we look at our Soldiers carries a lot of weight. Smile and look like you want to be there. It may surprise you how much your team will emulate your behavior.

6 - Stay Relevant

I struggle with this daily. I receive phone calls regularly and attend meetings where the team challenges my technical competence. It's proving difficult to overcome. If you fail to remain relevant, leadership and the team may stop inviting you to attend. Even if you're there, they won't listen to what you have to say. More importantly, when you try to inspire Soldiers and young NCOs based on your previous experiences, if what you say is not even close to relevant, they'll write you off as the old codger you present yourself to be.

7 - Confidence

Train yourself to believe in yourself and your

replacement. There was a time in Afghanistan, circa 2009, when I was a staff sergeant arguing with another staff sergeant about a trivial topic. Since he was promotable at the time, I looked up to him and challenged him about being his peer. I clearly remember when he said, "You'll never be my peer!" Those words have stayed with me and serve as a personal example of how to diminish and destroy a person's ego.

I'll never forget them because, over the years, I changed how I think about confidence and what it means to be a peer. As a sergeant major, I certainly have peers, but what about my Soldier peers who are not sergeants major?

I challenge the team to argue this matter. If you call yourself a Soldier and a leader, then you are my peer. I am proud to call you my peer because I'm above no one. When that NCO crushed me, even though we were both staff sergeants, I realized if I kept my

head down and worked hard, the rest would come. Even though he destroyed my fragile confidence at the time, it became the mortar between the bricks of the foundation on which I have built my leadership philosophy.

Train yourself to believe in yourself. That's a start. When you believe in yourself, know that your replacement will do their best to make your organization even better because we're all on the same team. We're peers and Soldiers and leaders, confident not only in ourselves, but profoundly confident in one another. We never hold anyone down; we prop them up to show them how superbly confident we are in them.

8 - Choose Your Battles

Not everything is worth arguing about. Which hill do you want to die on? Is it worth it? Is the juice worth the squeeze? Arguing over charge of quarters (CQ) duty versus arguing that your Soldier is ready for a promotion board. Pick and choose your battles and don't be known as the leader who just argues about everything. That person is not appreciated. We all know people like that. The person who enjoys playing devil's advocate. It's as if they get some sort of kickback for supporting an opposing viewpoint. Just let those things go. They're not worth it. Argue the things that influence your Soldiers and your unit overall. If winning your argument gives you nothing, only serving to make you feel better, you're better off saving your energy for a battle worth fighting.

9 - Time Management Versus People Management

We've all heard someone explain to senior leaders that the reason they failed a task or are trending in a

downward direction is because of a lack of personnel. I want to imagine a world where a complaint or excuse is only allowed to be used once. Meaning, if an excuse is used by someone in an organization, regardless of echelon, then that excuse can't be used again because someone already played that card.

If senior Army leaders tell Congress we're not meeting our recruiting goals, we can reasonably deduce we don't have the people we need. However, the word "need" is relative. Just because the modified table of organization and equipment states a unit requires a certain number of people doesn't mean all those people will participate in every single task, mission or priority.

In the words of a former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time." I feel we waste time thinking and wishing about having more people on our rosters. Spending that time arranging and clarifying work priorities serves the organization better.

I often wonder if advanced training in time management would better serve our young leaders instead of focusing on teaching leadership and command philosophies. Young leaders may feel overwhelmed by the number of daily tasks and priorities without enough Soldiers to accomplish them. Not everything can be a priority.

If we did have more people, could we effectively manage them? I propose we first focus on time management. We must complete quality work without the common distractions that stop us from accomplishing assigned priorities.

Challenge your leaders to conduct a time inventory and log what happens in a day. It won't take long to realize that when someone stops by, the chat it turns into a 15 or 30 minute conversation. How long after that does

it take a person to get back into the groove and into a state of productivity?

When I learned to conduct time inventories and recognized my poor time management skills, I started to make conscious decisions toward better time management. By better managing your time, you show you also value your team's time, allowing you to manage it truly and effectively. This is a compounding effect, and regardless of the number of priorities or tasks, you know your team accomplished the most amount of work possible in the time they were provided.

10 - No One Likes a Know-it-all

It's okay not to know something. It's also okay to let others have the information power; it might be all the power they have. Don't be so quick to cut someone off just to show them how much more you know. Let them win. You'll build trust, and that trust is so much better than proving how much you know. If one of your Soldiers tells you something you already know, keep your mouth shut and let them tell you. We can learn so much more from FORCING ourselves to listen.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to make light of my list of ten things I wish I'd known as a sergeant. I started with five, but added more as I wrote and ended up with ten. I'm not trying to "caveat" or "piggyback" off anyone, I caveated myself and just ended up with ten. As humorous as this is to me, most of us will learn way more than ten anecdotes, lessons, methods, practices or techniques in our time as leaders. Share what you can, when you can. As a leader, sharing your experiences helps your Soldiers become well-prepared, lethal, and ready future leaders. ■

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