



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson accepts the Battalion Colors at the 51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced change of responsibility ceremony Jan. 22, 2024. The first 30 days in a leadership position set the foundation for success through preparation, understanding the organization, and building relationships. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson)

The Critical First 30 Days

By Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson

51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced

The first 30 days establish the foundation for your time in a leadership position. You may arrive full of plans but begin questioning how many are achievable. However, proper preparation will allow you to execute most — if not all — of your ideas.

Tools can help you prepare. Even so, a new leadership position can be overwhelming. In planning, remain committed and consistent in building competencies. The work here is the key to your success.

This article illuminates how to properly approach your first 30 days by focusing on knowing and understanding the organization, setting up quick wins, and building relationships. This strategy can spur momentum for an enjoyable and rewarding leadership experience.

Know Your Formation

Knowing and understanding why an organization

exists is critical to leadership development. This knowledge is requisite to succeed in the first 30 days (and all those that follow). As the *Army Handbook for Leadership Transition* states, you should gather as much information as possible before assuming any leadership position (Department of the Army [DA], n.d.).

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey (2003) emphasizes the importance of understanding *before* being understood. Without comprehending an organization and position, you will feel overwhelmed within days. Knowing the formation includes understanding its mission and structure and finding the organization's strengths and weaknesses.

Analyzing an organization allows a leader to understand it deeply, which drives the success of any mission. This approach permits leaders to focus on the organization's needs rather than its wants.

Mission and Structure

The first step to understanding an organization is knowing its current and projected missions. Examining the mission and structure will help you develop a sense of clarity for planning and preparation, which is foundational in achieving success. In *Start with Why*, Simon Sinek (2009) writes that leaders must have clarity on why an organization exists — hence the importance of knowing the organization's mission. Understanding the “why” will enable leaders to communicate clearly to employees and customers and make critical decisions on training and task priorities.

The second part of understanding the organization is knowing its structure. The Army builds every organization for a purpose based on constraints and available resources, which are accessible on the Force Management System website (FMS Web). The structure may change every fiscal year. Leaders must understand this and stay abreast of updates. The senior enlisted leader of an organization must know the structure of the entire organization to distribute incoming personnel to the right positions at the right time. Although this may seem easy, not understanding the structure can create chaos and confusion within the organization, causing a subordinate organization to have more personnel or resources than another.

Once leaders understand the mission and structure, they must identify the strengths and weaknesses of the organization.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Identifying strengths and weaknesses within an organization includes observing and assessing the processes and systems in place and the personnel in critical positions. The Army's *Employee Engagement* training circular advises that one way to address areas of improvement within processes and systems is to encourage knowledge sharing among team members (DA, 2017). The opportunity to share knowledge may come naturally, or leaders may need to create these opportunities by implementing them on a training schedule.

Focus on areas needing improvement and the areas working well. Due to negative biases, leaders often overlook an organization's strengths. Recognizing that all areas require a level of observation will help support the identified strengths while simultaneously improving areas of weakness.

Throughout my 22 years as an Army leader, I've often heard that leaders must assess the organization for 30 days before making changes. This logic contradicts the Army's requirement for leaders to diagnose and address problems immediately. Some issues take time to resolve, depending on resources and time constraints.

The key is to avoid making changes out of unnecessary preference. Instead, implement changes that help the organization. At times, they must be instant. Others may take time. As the *Army Handbook for Leadership Transitions* states, “Immediate changes



Soldiers from the 51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced load the final vehicle during rail load operations in preparation for their upcoming deployment. By assessing the processes, systems, and personnel in key positions, senior leaders can ensure mission readiness and operational success. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson)



NCOs from the 51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced conduct Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development (NCOPD) 01 March 1, 2024. Every leader in the Army is responsible for the professional development of subordinate leaders, a proactive approach that leaders must include in training plans. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson)

should be made only for situations that involve safety or troop welfare, or because they are incompatible with your values” (DA, n.d., p. 28).

Quick Wins

One way to gain the organization’s hearts and minds is to set up quick wins within the first days of a leadership position. Creating opportunities is critical.

During this time, personnel may queue up problems to resolve. Addressing them is essential to building trust and credibility with Soldiers and key stakeholders. Actioning the issues that require little time and produce quick wins will be vital in building momentum.

The *Employee Engagement* training circular notes that demonstrating “care and support for follower well-being reinforces a positive organizational climate and builds trust” (DA, 2017, p. 21). These quick wins open opportunities to build long-lasting positive working relationships that make any assignment enjoyable.

Build Relationships

One of the first initiatives a leader must take when assuming a new leadership position is building relationships with key stakeholders in the organization. *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* emphasizes the importance of building these connections. These

relationships encourage trust and establish open communication and cohesiveness, which creates a climate that benefits all (DA, 2020).

Writing for the *Military Review*, Brig. Gen. Mark A. Holler states that relationships tremendously impact an organization, and he notes that they include leaders articulating the bigger picture, fostering two-way communication, building trust, and creating mutual accountability (Holler, 2023). Trust and two-way communication are the foundation of building a positive working relationship.

Once you understand the importance of knowing and understanding the organization, achieving quick wins, and building relationships, you must be able to combine these to create a trusting, enjoyable, and rewarding environment.

Putting It All Together

Putting it all together focuses on results, the “Do” within the *Be, Know, Do*. You may have heard, “Knowledge is power.” In truth, applying that knowledge is where power lies.

The first point I made was to understand the organization, which included finding the areas needing improvement. Developing and implementing a leader development program can help. Such a program will allow leaders to improve areas, build relationships, and

gain quick wins. According to FM 6-33, *Developing Leaders*, effective leader development incorporates building individual relationships with subordinates, which creates opportunities for sharing knowledge and experiences (DA, 2022). These sessions are best when they are feasible, suitable, and recurring events or activities. One way a leader can make these sessions routine is by scheduling weekly brown bag lunches with different levels of subordinates.

For example, as a command sergeant major, the first event could focus on first sergeants and master sergeants, the second event on platoon sergeants, the third on staff sergeants, and the fourth on sergeants. The events would provide an opportunity to build trust and relationships with all the organization's key leaders and allow the chance to integrate other developmental activities.

Sessions focusing on leader professional development or noncommissioned officer professional development create opportunities to educate and train leaders in areas needing focus. Every leader in the Army is responsible for the professional development of subordinate leaders, a proactive approach that leaders must include in training plans (DA, 2022). These opportunities need to be consistent and recurring. Often, these events are the first to go off the training schedule due to other events that must occur.

The senior enlisted leader of any organization is responsible for ensuring leaders plan and execute these opportunities consistently and that they align with the unit's needs and mission. Leader development sessions focus on unit and mission needs, but leaders can also incorporate other, more specific programs within their developmental program.

Integrating reading and writing programs throughout the organization demonstrates that leaders value Soldier development. These programs must start with continuous participation by leaders at all levels. Leaders are responsible for encouraging maximum participation, because developmental programs fall flat without leadership buy-in.

Some beneficial development methods include publishing articles, sharing knowledge and experiences with others, and distributing a recommended reading list.

Taking part in developmental programs offers several benefits. Soldier participants increase their ability to succeed in mandated military academic training. Additionally, productivity increases when Soldiers experience the benefits of such training. An effective program is a quick win and creates an environment that helps every leader know and understand the organization and build relationships.

Conclusion

Every day in a position is an opportunity to improve the organization, but the first 30 days set the foundation for all those that follow. Setting aside time to prepare before assuming any position will build leadership competencies, which are critical in building confidence in skills and behaviors.

Preparation includes knowing and understanding the organization's mission, structure, strengths, and weaknesses. Simply comprehending this will create opportunities to develop quick wins and build relationships, setting the stage for an enjoyable and rewarding opportunity.

So, as you prepare for your next position, ensure you take time to prepare beforehand. It will greatly impact your success. ■

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Command Sgt. Maj. Billy J. Atkinson is the command sergeant major for the 51st Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. He has served in various assignments and leadership positions over the last 24 years. He holds a certificate as an internet webmaster, a bachelor's degree in homeland security, a Master of Arts in management, and a Master of Science in instructional design, development, and evaluation.



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