



One day you'll make it; you'll walk the hallowed halls of the U.S. Army NCO Academy as a student of class number whatever and you'll be feeling yourself. And you should be feeling yourself because you made it to the pinnacle. (Courtesy photo by Command Sgt. Maj. Tammy Everette)

# Dear Future Sergeants Major

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Tammy Everette*

U.S. Army NCO Academy

**R**eflection is a funny thing. In the world of academia, it normally happens after a block of instruction, giving learners time to think about what they just heard and how it applies or can apply to their lives, their careers, or their studies.

In a professional career, reflection normally occurs after a major event, like an after-action review, or, in this instance, after 30-plus years of wearing the Army Combat Uniform (ACU), both Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP) and Universal Camouflage Pattern (UCP) and Battle Dress Uniforms (BDU).

On Feb. 1, 2027, my name will be transferred to the U.S. Army retired list and while the Army will go rolling along without me, there are several themes or lessons that appeared throughout my career as an NCO, and I genuinely feel like it is my duty to share.

With more than 27 years as an NCO, more than 13 as a sergeant major or command sergeant major, they were

my guiding light. They are now yours, future sergeants major, to use as you like so you can be better than me.

## Humility

One day you'll make it; you'll walk the hallowed halls of the U.S. Army NCO Academy as a student of class number whatever and you'll be feeling yourself. And you should be feeling yourself because you made it to the pinnacle.

However, a little bit of humility goes a long way.

It's important to realize you don't know everything and arrogance isn't cute. Now, you should be very proud of your accomplishments, but you should have a realistic understanding of your strengths and weaknesses — the very definition of humility.

No one is asking you to dim your light. In the words of Rihanna, "Shine bright like a diamond." Just don't shine bright and be wrong.

## Multiple Personalities

Mother, daughter, friend, peer, leader, disciplinarian, co-worker, colleague, comedian, social worker. I've been all of these at one point and not because I was diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, but because that's what my organization needed.

As a future sergeant major, what does your organization need you to be? And are you ready to wear many different hats, sometimes on the same day? How will you shed it when you take the uniform off in the evening or on the weekend? Don't underestimate the power of your example and influence; guard it with your life.

## Don't Forget Where You Came From

To get to where you are today, you had to be a Soldier first. You made that journey, so you were able to experience firsthand what life as a young Soldier meant — from living in the barracks and eating in the dining facility (DFAC) to learning how to raise a family on a limited income.

Don't ever forget those experiences and, most importantly, don't ever forget that your Soldiers live in those same environments and go through those same experiences. Give them some grace. Don't forget that you were once a young Soldier; use your new position, knowledge, and education to help them.

## Who's Your BFF?

The saying "It's lonely at the top" is real. Your trusted circle gets smaller and the demands and stress level increase. Whom can you call to vent? To talk without hesitation and say exactly what's on your mind? Do you have someone you can run ideas by because you're not quite sure about them yet and want an honest opinion before you potentially embarrass yourself in front of your organization?

As a sergeant major or command sergeant major, this may be the single most important person to you professionally; it was to me, and I've only had three in my 13 years as a sergeant major/command sergeant major. Who is your BFF?

## Pull Up a Chair

Waiting for that invitation to an important meeting? To be included in a working group? Too often, we complain about decisions that were made or information we didn't get in a timely manner.

Were you present? Is your unit plugged in? Are battle rhythms nested? If you believe you're a stakeholder, then it's your duty to be present or have your unit represented. In my entire career, I've only been kicked out of one meeting because I wasn't invited and that just happened a month ago.

Don't wait for the invitation, pull up a chair.



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## Lead Up, Down, and All Around

All sergeants major are created equal, right? It's from our higher headquarters, so it must be accurate, right? Maybe, but if the answer is no, then lead those around you. Your peers may need some help; help them. Your higher headquarters might be missing the mark; help them. It doesn't matter where you are in the hierarchy — be a good teammate and lead up, down, and all around so everyone wins.

## Bad Things Happen in Good Units

One of the hardest lessons to accept is that you can't control everything. We're taught to plan for every possible contingency, but the reality is that life happens.

When you get to the bare bones of it all, we're human, and humans make mistakes that can result in catastrophic outcomes. No matter how hard you train, no matter how often you check, double-check, and re-check, bad things can happen in good units that you can't prevent or control. You can, however, control your reaction and how you lead through the situation.

## Transparency Demands Maturity

In today's environment where information is at our fingertips, individuals demand to know the status of things and why a particular decision was made. This is transparency. But when individuals don't agree with the information provided, they proceed to disagree on social media or even reach out to other senior leaders and/or reporters.

I've seen this play out time and time again and it brought me to the conclusion that everyone *asks* for transparency, but they often can't *handle* transparency. Transparency demands maturity — the maturity to listen and understand, not to poke, demean, or discredit.



Your reputation will always precede you. Are you a team player? Do you get the job done? How do you treat people? This isn't about being liked; it's about your professional reputation, and I would argue that it's the most important factor as you progress as a sergeant major/command sergeant major. (Courtesy photo by Command Sgt. Maj. Tammy Everette)

## Feedback Loops

When you're a team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant or even a first sergeant, it's easy to understand your organization's operational tempo. It's easy to know your Soldiers and their families; you know all about their hobbies outside of work, their weekend trips, and their kids' sporting events.

The truth is, the higher you go in echelon, the harder it is to keep a finger on the pulse of those things. It's not because you're not interested, it's because your focus is different.

How do you stay connected to your formation and the people in it? Feedback loops are essential to knowing what is going on around you, how messages are received, and your organization's overall morale. Who are your trusted agents and how often do you solicit their feedback, formally or informally?

## Credibility Is Everything

When your name comes up in a conversation, what do people say about you? What kind of facial expressions do they make? Everyone isn't going to know you or have an opportunity to work with you; but they'll know your name.

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## Every Interaction Is an Assessment

Meeting people is part of the position but never forget: No matter how small the interaction, you're being assessed. Did you engage with the individual or did you blow them off as insignificant? Did you talk badly about someone who wasn't present? Did you have one too many adult beverages at the social event?

Sometimes a single interaction is the only thing someone may be able to recount when asked about you. What will they say?

## Strength in Numbers

Oftentimes many people are working on the same problem which may result in multiple potential solutions for senior leaders to choose from. We want our idea to be picked, and we want to be the loudest voice in the room advocating for our solution.

But imagine the power in shaping the decision by working together.

As a united front, the probability that everyone wins increases and, collectively, you've already done the hard work for your senior leaders, showing you can rally everyone together toward a solution.

## Answer the Question

If you know, you know, and if you don't, you don't. There's nothing worse than saying a lot of words but not actually answering the question. As a sergeant major, Soldiers want to hear your answer — good, bad, or indifferent.

If you dance around a question, it comes across as if you're hiding something or making something up because you don't know the answer. Senior leaders value honesty and candor from a sergeant major. Don't be overly politically correct and don't pontificate excessively on an idea; just answer the question.

## Anticipate Requirements, but Timing Is Everything

I've found the most success when I was able to anticipate leadership requirements. This comes from understanding the operational environment, the current climate, and senior leader messaging. If you put all those things together, it's easy to see where you're headed and how it's going to affect the organization.

It allows you to be proactive rather than reactive, but timing is key since you don't ever want to get too far ahead of senior leaders. Doing so removes their decision space and can cause chaos in your organization.

Sometimes you'll anticipate a requirement, do the work toward reaching a solution, but it's just not the right time. Don't get discouraged. Shelve it. You'll come back around to it when the Army is ready, and you'll already have a 90 percent solution.

## Have Fun but Know When it's Time to Go

For my entire career, I've always heard that you'll know when it's time to go and it'll probably have something to do with whether you're still having fun. To be honest, I stopped having fun many years ago. Fun wasn't what kept me going for 30 years. At this level, it's hard. My drive came from the people, from solving hard problems and instituting real change; most wouldn't describe that as fun, but I enjoyed doing those things.

As I grew, the things that brought me joy changed and that's how I knew it was time to go. No regrets, no



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bitterness. I'll retire with a full heart, grateful for the experiences and the people I met along the way.

How will you decide when it's time to go? What keeps you going? Whatever the reason, just know it's your decision to make.

## Conclusion

And before you try to clown me for not writing in APA format and citing references, that is not the purpose or intent of this article. The purpose of this article is simply to share my thoughts based on my experiences in the hope it will assist you in your professional journey. There is a story attached to each experience and maybe someday I'll share them. But for now, this will have to suffice. Do good and be good. Ultima! ■

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**Command Sgt. Maj. Tammy Everette** is the commandant of the U.S. Army NCO Academy (formerly the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence), Fort Bliss, Texas. Over her 30-year career, she has served in a variety of assignments, including intelligence analyst, S2 NCOIC, drill sergeant, fusion cell NCOIC, first sergeant, operations sergeant major, and command sergeant major. She holds a bachelor's degree in natural science and mathematics and a master's degree in organizational leadership.

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