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How to Add a Little Polish to Your Muddy Boots

By Sgt. Maj. Brian M. Disque and Erik N. Anderson, Chief, Nominative Sergeants Major Program Office and Director, Nominative Leader Course

Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army and Army Strategic Education Program

As someone who joined the Army in the 1990s, when I hear the term “Muddy Boots,” I can’t help but think back to green jungle boots. I LOVED my green jungle boots, wore them EVERYWHERE and WELL AFTER the directed wear-out date.

They were rugged, well-worn, with the leather a little scuffed up over time and had lost some of their water repellent properties. But they were comfortable, reliable, and fit my feet like a second skin — better than any set of full leather or desert boots. Combined with black 550 cord laces, my green jungle boots were indestructible.

In my early years, our first sergeant *always* checked four things when we went through the chow line — did we shave, did we re-camo, did we change our socks, AND *were our boots blackened*. As a young

leader, these things were a nuisance, a distraction from training, and an attempt to bring needless garrison tasks to the field.

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As old Soldiers, we knew that with a little bit of Kiwi, a boot brush, and some elbow grease, we could hydrate, protect, refurbish, and waterproof the leather making the boots useful again. When applied, brushed, and gently rubbed, the wax polish filled in the pebbled leather’s natural gaps and scuffs acquired through wear.

With additional resources — water, a rag, a lighter, and cotton balls — and enough time, energy, and effort, we could make them shine. But even with a Windex, glass-like sheen, if you looked hard enough, you could see the creases in the leather from where they bent on the wearer's foot when they walked, indicating a road long travelled in those boots.

By the time you reach 20 years of service, you've got a wealth of tactical and technical experience in your career military field (CMF). You're *well worn*, like a pair of green jungle boots. But to continue to be effective in positions of greater responsibility and impact and not be perceived as *worn out*, perhaps you could benefit from a little Kiwi.

1. Know your limits

Twenty years in a CMF, working in similar organizations with familiar structure and mission requirements, enables technical and tactical skill mastery. Additionally, it provides the foundation for your identity, competence, and effectiveness as a leader.

Such circumstances also bring a level of individual comfort because you deal with items, issues, opportunities, and challenges within your experience. Junior Soldiers and leaders come to you for the answers because of that experience and expertise.

However, the Army enterprise is much bigger and broader than the CMFs, structure, and mission requirements in your brigade or division. When assigned to an "echelon above brigade," Army enterprise, or Joint Force organization, you would likely feel like a fish out of water initially because CMF expertise may no longer be the primary competence the team needs from you. I know that I sure felt that way when I first joined a deployed four-star-level NATO organization.

Resist the temptation to assume you have all the answers. The most effective leaders rarely have the right answer — rather, they ask the right question. The question that challenges an assumption, that addresses the friction point, or illuminates a gap. Trust your experience and instincts and learn quickly. But remember, you won't have all the answers.

2. Cultivate strong relationships

The longer you remain in the Army, the farther your reputation precedes you when reporting to a new organization. Over a 20-year career, you serve with or encounter many people — in your units, on your installations, during professional military education (PME), and on temporary duty (TDY) to name a few interactions.

Because you don't have a crystal ball, you can't tell today which of those points of contact might be personally or professionally important to you or your organization in the future.

As you reach senior leadership levels, your tactical and technical expertise matters less than your ability to build and maintain strong relationships. Some of the most effective senior leaders are the ones who can say, "I know a guy. Let me give him a call and see if he can help," when the organization faces a new challenge that seems insurmountable.



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These leaders extend influence outside of their team and beyond the organizational block-and-wire diagram because at some point during their career they established a connection with someone else.

Cultivating strong relationships means more than networking, collecting business cards, or following each other on social media. It means investing time, energy, and effort to connect with others, especially those outside your unit, CMF, component, and service. PME schools and TDY offer some of the best opportunities to meet someone new and start building a relationship.

Unfortunately, people in those settings often tend to gather with those they already know or with whom they previously served. That's okay at first since they're maintaining a prior relationship, but if they fail to branch out to meet others during their time together, it's an opportunity lost. As the old children's song goes, *"Make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other gold."*

3. Your team is bigger than your team

As a senior leader it's your responsibility to understand your role and where your organization fits in the next higher echelon. More of your focus should be outside your organization — latterly and upward — to see how your team contributes to the larger effort.

As such, you and your organization may have to "take one for the team" to accomplish the overall objective. Senior leadership roles require the maturity to know what that greater good is and then position your team to accomplish their part to achieve it.



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A quote long attributed to the 1980 U.S. Men's Olympic Hockey Team coach, Herb Brooks, reinforces this point: "When you pull on that jersey, you represent yourself and your teammates, and the name on the front is a [heck] of a lot more important than the one on the back!"

The good thing is that the Army is a team sport and a BIG organization. You have Army teammates you've never met working on issues to support your team that you don't even know about. Additionally, they might be challenged by problems that you and your team have already solved.

You're part of a great U.S. Army organization — so get invested in others' success. Learn who is out there on your flanks supporting you and ask how you and your team can help them.

4. Don't wait for someone to develop you

While serving in a unit with high operational tempo, especially for the commander and command sergeant major (CSM), I occasionally heard complaints that our unit wasn't focusing on leader development.

I reminded those folks that every meeting with a senior leader is a chance to develop yourself. Yes, it requires a "meta" approach: How are they receiving information, what guidance are they giving, how are they communicating?

Every day, there are a hundred examples of senior-level leadership for us to consider. Make sure you have a seat at the table, and every now and then zoom out and think beyond the meeting and consider how the leader is leading you ... and what you can learn from it.

5. Think about who is listening

Boy, do I miss the days when most problems could be sorted out at a close-out formation. Everyone listens to you — Soldiers, families, civilian and contracted workforce, veterans and Army alumni, defense industry partners, community leaders, joint and government leaders, partners and allies, and even our adversaries. And each one interprets your message differently.

The first step is to be conscious of who's listening and what they might be interested in and why. Typically, there is someone on your team who knows each of these individuals quite well and can bring you up to speed. Considering other perspectives should start to come naturally. Give some thought to those who might be listening and what's important to them.

Give some extra care to your writing. Before you send that email, give it another look and check for brevity and tone — how will the reader receive your message? Better yet, could you avoid the email and have a conversation? A friend serving in a senior staff position told me he practiced this more in the past six months than in the past 25 years.

6. Smile for the camera

Do yourself a favor — when you take that command photo, smile! Never underestimate the power of a warm greeting and a smile. The last thing you want to do is give a vibe that you're unapproachable. Resist the urge to show your war face and smile instead.

While you're at it, try to master the art of the three-minute conversation. Yes, your time is valuable. But remember, every person in your headquarters (and the Army or your unit) is your teammate, and the three minutes you spend with them can be profound. Make it count and invest a little time getting to know your team.

7. Max out your broadening assignments

I've had a few opportunities to work outside my CMF. One took me to a college campus where our organization was part of the university hierarchy, and instead of Soldiers, I worked with cadets.

I was also fortunate to serve as the Area Support Group-Kuwait CSM. I honestly had no idea what this unit was or what it did, but my time there exposed me to theater Army, air defense, and a massive sustainment enterprise that, frankly, I didn't know anything about.

Thanks to this assignment, I learned about port operations, what an Army field support brigade does, and the thousands of duties performed by a sustainment brigade. Strangely, all those things were useful to me down the road.

Any chance to work outside your CMF is a good thing. If you plan to serve in the Army beyond 20 years, it's highly likely you'll work with many different Army units. The little things you pick up along the way will be of great service to you later.

8. Restrain yourself

We've often heard the mantra, "lead, follow, or get out of the way." I'm here to tell you that getting out of the way isn't the worst thing you can do. What I'm talking about is leading appropriately at echelon. Be aware that your presence can unintentionally disempower or diminish initiative. Make sure your team is resourced and understands the intent — and let them win.

Be aware that everyone is going to bring you problems. Most of them aren't really yours to solve, so don't take the bait.

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it). Two out of 10, they need someone's help and I refer them. And one out of 10 times, it's truly a problem for me to solve. Don't disempower by solving someone else's problem."

Also, you don't have to have an answer for everything right away. You can hold your feedback and simply say you'd like some time to think about it. Don't get put on the spot and get caught thinking out loud — wait until you're ready to provide clear guidance. If you're thinking out loud, let people know it, otherwise, the walls might be painted a different color before you get back from lunch.

9. Self-awareness over self-improvement

Maybe I'm a contrarian, but I think self-improvement is a little overrated. Now, if we're talking about a skill you need for your job, that's a different situation, but frankly, the things I've been bad at, I've been bad at for 30 years.

It feels pretty good to know that when I'm faced with something I don't enjoy doing or I'm not good at, I can use my teammates' strengths to help me. I've implemented a few strategies to help me with the things with which I struggle, but it really comes down to awareness.

You're not going to change some aspects of your personality. We are who we are. Let's stop trying to improve these "unchangeable" things and recognize that self-awareness will take us a lot further to being better leaders.

Good luck!

Technical and tactical proficiency combined with a natural application of leadership will take you a long way in the Army, but eventually you'll run off the map sheet and find yourself breaking a new trail.

Have fun, trust your instincts, and remember that growth and maturity is an ongoing process, so give yourself a little grace. You wouldn't be in the job if you weren't the right leader! Your boots are muddy and well-worn ... nothing that a little Kiwi and elbow grease can't fix. ■



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