

Maxims of a Staff Officer

By Maj. Steve Wojdakowski and Maj. Matt Williamson

Army officers spend a majority of their time functioning as staff officers, yet they receive little instruction or formal education on the characteristics and qualities needed to succeed in that role. We share the following maxims as a guide to complement professional development and as insight for further discussion.

Some of these principles we learned the hard way, by making mistakes and receiving “mentorship” from our superiors and noncommissioned officer counterparts. Many of them are based on strong leadership and teamwork. We have grouped them by category and consider the first maxim to be the most important.

The Organization

Nothing matters more than the success of the organization.

Professionally speaking, your organization’s success matters more than your success. Routinely demonstrate that goal to your subordinates and strive to create that environment. If you see something detrimental to your unit, fix it, regardless of whether it is within your staff function. Never say the words “that’s not my job.” Your teammates will see that you care more for the team than for yourself. Wherever possible, make the complicated simple.

Be on the team.

The Army works as a team, and nothing can be accomplished alone. As a staff officer, you are a member of a team, no matter the echelon at which you work. When the team is working, work. If a team member needs help, help. Never shy away from carrying someone’s workload, especially if they are overwhelmed and even if their task has nothing to do with your staff function. Your teammates will respect the fact that you are a team player and, more importantly, reliable. Participate in every unit team-building event that you can; team building is hard when the team doesn’t show up.

Actively work to improve the organization.

No matter the organization, you are a reflection of it, and it is a reflection of you. Part of your duty as an officer and soldier is to improve your foxhole. Leave your staff section better than when you arrived. Far too many soldiers, at all ranks, perpetuate poor, incomplete or worthless processes because “that’s the way it’s always been done.” Never settle for mediocrity. Look forward and work to change the organization to meet the demands of the future. Build processes and standard operating procedures that make sense, and eliminate bureaucracy. Use your experiences and expertise to make the staff at large more efficient and effective. Start preparing now for your replacement to ensure a seamless transition when you depart.

Staff officers are leaders.

Even if you are a staff section of one, you still owe the Army and the organization good leadership. Take the time to mentor junior officers and NCOs. Be a sounding board for junior officers, and give them perspective when needed. Cultivate relationships with the senior NCOs on the staff, and continue to learn from their experience and expertise. You will find that the organization runs more smoothly if junior officers feel comfortable coming to you and your peers to ask questions or vent.

The Boss

Understand the commander's vision and intent.

Never turn down an opportunity to receive guidance from the commander. A commander is very busy and may give logistics guidance in a targeting meeting. You cannot help the organization succeed if you don't know how the commander envisions success. Provide the commander with what he or she needs to be successful, and be honest. Nest your assessments and running estimates in the commander's vision and intent, and package the information in a way that it can be understood quickly.

Never let your boss be surprised, especially in public.

Keep your boss informed through regular touchpoints, and never sit on time-sensitive information. If there is a chance your boss or the commander will be surprised by something, push it up the chain quickly. Have the courage to present bad news; it never gets better with time.

You get one chance to disagree with the boss.

You can make your counterargument to the boss once, and not in public unless he or she solicits it. Once the boss decides, execute with every fiber of your being until complete. The Army functions on subordinates following orders, and sabotaging your boss's decision is not only underhanded but bad for the organization.

Whatever interests the boss should fascinate you.

That doesn't mean suck up to the boss's personal views and off-duty activities. It means know what the boss values as important to the organization and spend your efforts learning all about those interests.

Make life easier on your boss.

You will find that most challenges can be resolved at your level or below. Go direct with adjacent units and higher headquarters to resolve issues before involving the boss to help keep their plates clean. However, know when to elevate issues to the boss's level, and err on the side of too early rather than too late. You owe your boss as much time as possible to make an informed decision. Your boss will appreciate a "heads up but no action required yet" much more than "oh, this blew up in our faces."

Others

You owe your subordinates timely and honest feedback.

Just as you seek guidance and feedback from your rating chain, you owe the same to your subordinates. Set aside time routinely to provide honest feedback and a plan to correct deficiencies. No rating should ever be a surprise.

Relationships matter.

Staff officers often close themselves in their offices and behind their desks, doing what staff officers do. However, your ability to cultivate relationships with your teammates pays huge dividends when tackling a specifically challenging work-related task. You build credibility and clout with other staff sections the more you take time to put yourself out there. Routinely visit the other staff sections, adjacent unit staffs and higher and lower headquarters. Even a five-minute "hey, what's up" drive-by means something. You also will gain a better understanding of the challenges other headquarters face and may be able to offer your assistance in ways you didn't know possible. Subordinate staff officers like to know you have their back. As conflict arises (and it

always does), resolve it at the source. Backstabbing and one-upmanship breed distrust and disrespect, which can be disastrous on a staff. Respect the counterpoint even if you disagree with it.

Know the key players on adjacent and subordinate unit staffs.

Remember, relationships matter. This entails more than just associating an email with a position. Know them by name and face. Visit them regularly. A division space operations officer, for example, should know all of the brigade combat team operations officers in the division by name, at a minimum. They may not remember you every time you talk to them, but make a point to shake their hand and say hello whenever the opportunity arises. Make yourself available to subordinate echelon staffs. If anything, they will remember that someone at division does what you do.

Speak the language of the warfighter.

Regardless of your staff function, you exist to support the warfighter. As such, you should speak the language of warfighting in terms of doctrine. To adequately support operations, staff officers must understand operations. Read and appreciate doctrine, and stay connected to training centers and the institutional force.

You as a Leader

Own your tasks.

This is basic leadership. When assigned a task or given guidance by the commander, own it as if you came up with it. Never use the boss's name in vain; you lose loyalty points with your boss and chip away at your own power base. Execute your assigned tasks with violence of action as if they are your own ideas, and if you can't achieve success go back to your boss with courses of action and a recommendation.

Be humble.

Welcome to real life. You don't know everything. A quality leader solicits input from subordinates, weighs it dispassionately and makes the decision. When leading a team, seeking input from teammates builds cohesion and develops more creative solutions. Recognize your own shortcomings and knowledge gaps. If you are inexperienced at the military decision making process, for example, it is incumbent upon you to seek out the information and better yourself.

Be the biggest advocate for your warfighting function or functional area.

Regardless of your staff function, no one on the staff or in subordinate units should be a greater advocate than you. Never pass on an opportunity to educate leaders and other staff functions about your specialty. Become a true subject-matter expert in your field and why it's important to warfighting, and you will earn credibility. Write professionally about your field. Educate and train the team on what your functional area brings to the fight.

Never take "no" for an answer.

Unfortunately, many staff officers and NCOs will refuse to do something because it's too hard or time consuming. Most problems have a solution, and the easy thing to do is say it's too hard. Great staff officers find solutions to these problems and can motivate others to address them.

Work hard, efficiently.

As a staff officer, you should work hard to provide flexibility and freedom of movement to subordinate units. After a long weekend or leave period, get to work before everyone else so that you can get a jump on things. Establish efficient and effective systems that enable high productivity

up and down. Keep meetings from going long by setting agendas beforehand and sticking to them. Working hard does not mean working late, though you may have to work late to accomplish the mission.

You as a Contributor

You are never the smartest person in the room.

It doesn't matter what experience you have, how many graduate degrees you earned or how technical your functional area is, there are always people in the room smarter than you. Be confident enough in your experience and knowledge to allow discussion. Not only does this make your peers and subordinates feel like their opinions matter, but the plan will be better for it.

Seek counseling from your rating chain.

As you move up in echelon, it gets more and more difficult to interact directly with your rater and senior rater. Make a concerted effort to schedule office calls with them, especially when first arriving at the unit. These may be the only times you ever engage them in person, and you want to use that time effectively. Prepare for the office calls by mapping out the message you want to send and the guidance you need. Provide read-ahead material when applicable so that your boss is not surprised by the meeting and can devote the necessary time to prepare for it. You may get only 15 minutes (or less) every few months, so make it count.

Avoid becoming a single point of failure.

Space operations officers rarely work with other space operations officers in the same organization. Many other functional area officers are the same. A consequence of such specialized areas is that officers often can become a single point of potential failure. Some officers intentionally may make themselves a single point of failure for fear of losing relevance or to make themselves seem important. Avoid this at all costs. Single points of potential failure do not ensure the success of the organization. Bring everyone that you can on board with what you're doing, even if it's through as simple a step as CC on an email. Organizations may not necessarily remember you for when things run smoothly, but you can guarantee they will remember if something you worked on goes wrong and you're not there to fix it.

Provide timely SITREPs to your rating chain.

You may rarely engage your rating chain in person. Make sure you keep your rater and senior rater informed through regular situation reports that are nested within their guidance. Find the balance that ensures they receive your message while not overcrowding their inboxes. Format your report in terms of the raters' stated priorities. They will appreciate knowing that you work hard for the organization, and they will be better postured to write you a fair rating when the time comes.

If you don't know something, admit it, then figure it out quickly.

You will lose credibility instantly if you try to fake it. If your boss or the commander asks a question specific to your staff function that you can't answer, say so. Then work diligently to get the correct answer and inform your boss immediately. He or she asked the question to know the answer, and you owe it to him or her to provide it. Get the answer to the boss before your boss pings you for it. Learn to anticipate questions, and continuously educate yourself to ensure you can answer questions when asked.

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