

Being a PL

Advice for Platoon Leaders, by Tom Kilbride

A soon-to-be platoon leader recently wrote me and asked me this question:

What are you looking for in a platoon leader?

This is my response, which I've agreed to share via the PL and CC professional forums (<http://PL.army.mil> & <http://CC.army.mil>). I've had the opportunity to serve in several types of units on multiple combat rotations. My expectations for a platoon leader are the same regardless of the type of unit. I expect a lot of my junior officers, and I counsel them on the following five areas: Leadership, Training, Maintaining, Caring, and Personal.

1. Leadership

a. Be an expert. This is an essential and difficult task. You will lack experience upon arrival, and must build it to be fully effective. Your first priority is to demonstrate proficiency at current training and missions. Study the manuals, ask the other lieutenants, talk to your platoon sergeant, get smart. You should be able to demonstrate mastery of all the weapons, NVDs, radios, and other equipment assigned. If you are unfamiliar, set aside some time with the commo sergeant, armorer, and manuals to get up to speed. Keep learning and improving your technical and tactical proficiency until the day you leave.

b. Lead by personal example. If your platoon is doing it, you are doing it also (preferably better than anyone else!). Physical fitness and athletic ability are important. You should be able to "smoke" your platoon in PT that you lead, without error in commands, exercises, or drill IAW FM 21-20. Your physical example is central to your credibility as a leader. 300 on the APFT is the GOAL for officers.

c. Your platoon sergeant is your right hand man. He will teach you more than anybody else. You need to actively seek his advice on all matters that pertain to your platoon. He will set you up for success. Listen to him! You do not have to throw your rank around to show you are in charge; he knows that and is going to support you 100%.

d. Set and enforce high standards. If you see something you know is wrong, make the necessary correction. Don't wait for someone else to enforce it. If you don't make the correction, you have just established a new standard.

e. Take the initiative. Don't wait to be told what to do. You should be constantly leaning forward, anticipating what is going to happen next, maximizing available training time, doing what I would want if I were present.

f. Make a decision. Don't be indecisive; the best is the enemy of the good. A fair decision executed in time is far better than the best decision executed late every time. If you are the senior man on the ground, take charge. If I am not there and a decision is needed, make it and I will back it up; always use my intent on this.

g. Keep the communications open up and down the chain. You must always be listening to your subordinates. Remember that they are not always right, but they have a wealth of experience.

Informally talk to soldiers, and seek opportunities to listen to what they have to say privately. Talk to all of your soldiers; do not alienate anyone. It is a good way to seek input on how to improve your platoon. It is critical that all platoon members feel that they have a means to participate in the platoon's growth

h. Be aggressive, but don't be a know it all. Initially, you should be in the mouth-shut, receive mode around the leaders of the company until you start learning the ropes. It is important that you are perceived by your peers and subordinates as being interested in learning from their experience and knowledge, but don't hesitate if you think something is wrong. Just because that is the way it has always been done, doesn't mean it is the best or right way.

i. Learn from your subordinates, and never stop improving your platoon. Remember that you will never be good enough. Many leaders get to the point where they get tired, complacent, or think they are where they and their unit need to be. You are never finished and you can always get better. Solicit suggestions from junior NCOs and Rangers for new ideas.

j. Check, supervise, and inspect. A unit is not Utopia and things that are not checked will NOT get done on a consistent basis. This is a common fallacy among newly assigned officers. NCO's and Rangers span the gamut from outstanding to poor. You must still supervise, guide, and develop your subordinates, in addition to keeping them challenged. You must be the toughest inspector, standard setter, and supervisor until all adjust to your high standards.

k. Learn from the Executive Officer. He has a lot of experience that you can use. Remember that he is the second in command and you are not on equal terms with him, regardless of rank.

2. Training

a. You, and only you, are responsible for the training and performance of your platoon. Make use of every spare minute of time for individual and low-level training. Get input from the squad leaders and platoon sergeant on what opportunity tasks tie into needed individual training, and then make sure it gets done. You must constantly be thinking of new areas for training which are imaginative and directly related to what your platoon would have to do in combat. Visualize it, and prepare for it. Ensure you conduct PCIs prior to training, weeks out to ensure that you have all the training resources prepared, classes rehearsed, evaluation plan, etc. Good preparation for training will ensure that your platoon conducts quality training. Make sure you and your platoon sergeant are present for all squad training.

b. Conduct detailed AARs with an evaluation plan that is IAW published Army doctrine, manuals, and SOPs. You need to be the worst critic when you identify areas that need improvement. Solicit input from all soldiers on areas that the platoon needs to sustain and improve.

c. All training needs to be METL focused. Soldiers are the best because they do the basics at the Ph.D. level better than anyone else. Do not be distracted by "Hooah" or "adventure" training; be creative but focus on the basics using FM 7-8.

e. Cross train and develop your subordinate leaders. Your squad leaders and gunners must be able to accomplish the mission if you and your platoon sergeant become casualties. You must train your subordinates to function two levels above their current duty position. Naturally the first priority is to ensure they are totally proficient at their current duty position.

3. Maintenance

a. Know your platoon equipment and its present condition intimately. Keep your eyes open during maintenance, ensure all equipment is inspected by the chain of command, then spot check for yourself. Your equipment must be maintained at -10/-20 standards. Know the status of parts that are due in. Talk to the armorer, commo sergeant, mechanics, and others to speed the repair of downed equipment and get feedback on how the platoon is maintaining its equipment. This includes checking the motor pool to ensure standards are being met.

b. Your personal equipment needs to be the cleanest and best maintained in the platoon. Your platoon will look at you to set the standard for maintenance. They will be inspected your gear on a daily basis, in both garrison and the field.

c. Maintain 100% of all platoon assigned equipment without fail. If negligent - you lose it - you buy it.

4. Caring

a. Know what is going on in your platoon at all times—in the barracks, off post, in the field, with privates and with NCO's. Don't let little "Hitlers" run the barracks or terrorize the new soldiers. Your platoon must be a team and you need to always work on building the team.

b. Work on improving the quality of life for your soldiers. Work with your platoon sergeant and squad leaders to improve the living conditions. Take an active interest in this area. Plan team-building social events as well.

c. The Family Readiness Group is an integral part of this organization. As a single officer and a platoon leader, I expect you to attend the formal Family Readiness Group meetings. This will help you understand the needs and requirements of your married soldiers. Take an active interest in the married and single soldiers' unique problems. We train more than any other unit in the Army, so time off is a valuable asset; don't abuse it.

d. Safety. This is a critical part of training and relates to taking care of soldiers. Make sure you conduct Risk Assessments prior to all training. If your inner voice is telling you that something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. If you make the call and stop something that doesn't appear to be within the safety parameters, I will back you 100%. There is a tendency to believe that pushing the envelope equates to better training; this is not true. Our jobs are inherently dangerous and we accept risk as part of our daily training; always make sure it is not unnecessary risk.

e. Take care of each other. Loyalty is one of the most important qualities in a man. Do not talk behind the backs of fellow officers. The officers of the company are a team, and you need to always work on building the team. The officer you work with every day may be the man who pulls your platoon out of a tight spot in combat. I will not tolerate the "I've been here longer, we - they" attitudes.

5. Personal

a. Live the Ranger Creed.

b. Maintain uncompromising standards of conduct, both on and off duty. It goes without saying - don't lie, cheat, steal, or encourage / permit it in any of your men. A Ranger does not lie to another Ranger. Remember that you are an officer and your conduct should be exemplary. You live in a glass house. Don't place yourself in a social situation with your platoon that would compromise your position of authority.

c. Keep your integrity standards at the highest level. Be honest without exception, up and down the chain of command.

d. Get and know all SOPs and Policies. Not knowing the SOP or policy is no excuse. If your platoon does not know or have a written SOP that everyone knows and adheres to—write one. Unless everyone knows and adheres by it, it is not an SOP.

e. I will not tolerate late administrative paperwork, i.e. awards, NCOERs, training schedules, etc. I will give you suspenses and I expect you to meet them or identify early that you will be unable to meet them and ask for an extension.

f. Suffer all the hardships your platoon is suffering, and revel in their successes.

g. Don't forget to keep a good sense of humor and have fun in your job. This is the most exciting and challenging job in your career!