

**Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Commanders:
Things NOT to do as a commander**
by Jeb Downing, E/2-3 CAV

Unlike the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, this article does not offer a formula for success. I have both read his book, and briefly used the Seven Habits Organizer offered by Covey, so I understand the principals he espouses. This article is simply a laundry list of bad habits that many commanders often display during their short tenure in command.

As far as bad habits go, we all have them. The key is to identify them - and then minimize our propensity to resume the trend when things become hectic. It's hard to change human nature, so as part of your own professional development I recommend taking a long hard look at what weaknesses you bring to the table before accepting the guidon.

The following are presented as a list of Bad Habits a commander might display:

1. **Always worrying what the commander next door** or the commanders down the street are doing. Don't confuse this with the good habit of seeking out good ideas, which is definitely a positive attribute. The commander who is obsessed with how to be different from, or critical of, all of his fellow commanders will often times neglect his own duties. Focus on your planning, execution, people and equipment and let the squadron/battalion commander focus on the other guys.

2. **Constantly being confrontational with the next higher level staff.** Don't confuse this with picking your battles when you feel strongly that a bad decision is about to be made. But the commander who tries consistently to embarrass the next higher level staff by bringing up contentious issues during command and staff meetings ultimately accomplishes two things:

a. He makes the staff angry - adding to the trouble, as they will likely go out of their way not to help him (and his troop/company).

b. Establishes himself as a whiner. (An unfortunate side effect to being labeled as a whiner is that your unit gets the label as well.)

My recommendation is to always discuss the contentious issues behind closed doors: first with the staff agency who is responsible for the issue, and finally with the squadron/battalion commander. The result is, cooler heads ultimately prevail.

3. **Having no vision of how you want your unit to look when you leave.** "If you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there." Although the quote has been attributed to Yogi Berra, I have no idea who originally said it.

Based on your assessment of the company training calendar, as well as the state of maintenance and supply after your inventory, you should have a good idea of where you need to focus your efforts over the next eighteen months. Sit down with pen and paper and map out your

plan for your troop/company and set goals with target dates. Once you feel confident with the roadmap for your company's future, share it with someone you trust to get their opinion. Once you feel good about it, publish it for all your leaders to read.

Follow up by devoting ten minutes during your second or third training meeting to explain it to your people. They will appreciate it, as they are the ones to help you get the unit where it needs to go.

4. **Refusing to listen to good ideas.** (This is the one that frustrates me the most.) I have seen countless commanders refuse to consider doing something solely because someone else had thought of it first. Don't fall into this trap! If it's a good idea, and you can apply it to your organization, then do it!

5. **Constantly being confrontational with the Squadron/Battalion Command Sergeant Major.** I heard a fellow commander once say "I don't care about the CSM, I outranked him when I was just a second lieutenant." Having an attitude such as his will come back to haunt you; mark my words.

My recommendation for anyone getting ready to begin command is to ask the CSM for an office call prior to taking the guidon. Have a few questions prepared for him, and ask for any advice he might offer. Let him "bend your ear" if he wants to. This will help to establish yourself as someone who can listen, and will be a positive way to start your relationship with him.

As outlined in habit number 2, the only smart way to deal with the CSM on contentious issues is to go behind closed doors and try to work it out with him one on one. The only caveat to this approach is, don't do it too often or you could alienate your First Sergeant.

6. **Being aloof around your soldiers.** Everyone has their own personality, so this is a tough one to make recommendations on. I am not of the opinion that you have to be an obnoxious extrovert, constantly using expletives, in order to relate to your soldiers (but some people do feel that way). If you are more comfortable being a quiet yet confident commander, I would recommend being yourself over trying to be someone you saw in a good war movie (they weren't real either).

The simple rule I tried to follow was to talk to my soldiers as I was walking around the troop area checking training/maintenance. Things like "How was your weekend trip?" or "How is your daughter doing in school?" go a long way. The implied task, however, is to talk to them enough to know they had a weekend trip planned or they have a daughter in school. I guarantee your soldiers and NCOs will appreciate the interest you show in them as people (with lives and families) as well as professionals.

If you have trouble talking to your soldiers, work hard at it. It's free of charge and they appreciate it.

7. Dismissing the Family Support Group (FSG) as a "Wives Club," too screwed up or complicated to warrant your attention. This is the toughest one to approach in most cases. You will deal with everything from wives with a chip on their shoulder about officers (or officers' wives), to wives that feel the FSG is a social club, to wives that think it is a complaint forum. Collectively, their ulterior result is to weaken your FSG's effectiveness.

From the beginning, I would emphasize that the FSG is there to assist the chain of command in dealing with family problems during deployments - period. I would state such at the first FSG meeting you attend and then ask all those who feel differently to discuss other business before or after the formal portion of the FSG meetings.

Simply put, if you are able to get at least five interested and concerned spouses to volunteer their efforts during deployments, you can have a successful Family Support Group. If the right training is conducted at your monthly FSG meetings, you will be free to train your soldiers in the field with minimal family distractions. As a great squadron commander of mine once said, "the FSG is there to help get the wife to the emergency toe appointment, not to help get the soldier out of the field so he can take his wife to the emergency toe appointment."

Don't get me wrong, the FSG can assist on things like picnics and Christmas parties, but that is not its primary function.

Conclusion:

A different officer who grew up in different units, on different posts, in a different branch would undoubtedly come up with a different list of seven bad habits they have observed.

Your task, Commander, is to do a self-assessment prior to command to identify any negative attributes you feel you might have. Address them and try to overcome them. Again, human nature is hard to change but do your best, and that is all anyone can ask.