



# OWNERSHIP: THE TEAMLEADER'S GUIDE

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### **Abstract**

If I can sum up the guidance needed for the young NCO about to embark on the monumental task of caring for the health, welfare, and training of today's Soldier in one word, it would be ownership. No doubt and easy word to say and understand, but try and find it in action today. Own everything you and your team does and fails to do, and you're on your way to becoming a great leader. Don't allow your ego to block your ambition and your team's success; own everything in your world so you can effectively train and utilize the members of your team. Ownership is not a new concept, it has always been around however, applying it has seen its absence in the NCO Corps. I challenge all Team Leaders or soon to be Team Leaders to read this paper and begin exercising precisely what it means to be an NCO; own the mission, gather support locally, and execute.

### **The “Back in My Day” leader**

Over the course of your career, no matter how long or short it may be, you will run into this NCO; days were shorter, hotter, up-hill, and NCOs were stronger. I had this leader 20 years ago when I came in and I still see them around today; I even catch myself at times being him. The Army has definitely changed in my lifetime so there is truth to what this leader is saying however, the responsibility of today’s NCO has greatly increased as well. What we ask of our NCO Corps today, is a challenge that we have yet to master ourselves. If you feel as though you cannot keep up and make the “back in my day” leader happy, you feel overwhelmed, slower, challenged day in and day out, you are on the right track. It’s where every NCO finds themselves that truly care about their position, the mission and their Soldiers; leadership is forged, not given. If you are getting great sleep at night and live a stress free life, you’re probably not doing it right.

You have most likely heard it before, but being an NCO is a full-time job and it requires ownership. You have probably also heard, “there’s no such thing as a bad Soldier, just bad leaders” however, I find it inaccurate. After 20 years in the military, both Marine Corps and the Army, I most definitely feel there are bad Soldiers; what they need to say is there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.

### **The Team**

Ownership extends from the very top of your chain of command all the way down to the individual Soldier on your team; all elements must work together in unity to support the common mission (Willink 2015). It is your job to ensure everyone owns the mission. I am now firmly

outside the “E4 Mafia” as it used to be called, however, one key common phrase whenever an undesirable mission came about was, “First Sergeant wants us to”, “The Commander wants this”, or “The Platoon Sergeant said”. The issue with these phrases is not that they are not true, they most certainly want this stuff done; the issue is that the Team Leader, Squad Leader, or Platoon Sergeant failed to own that mission. Let’s go mow the grass around the company, why? Because we want to have the best Company area in the Battalion; let’s show them what a real standard looks like. Own the mission as your own, gather support locally, and execute.

A leader must be a true believer in the mission if they expect others to follow (Willink 2015). You must think outside of mowing grass, police-calling and mopping floors; think about combat applications. Would you want to follow a leader into a foxhole that is hesitant, doesn’t believe you should be there, doesn’t feel you can win? Negative! In our profession, sometimes you are placing yourself and your team in a difficult, complex or dangerous situation. In this instance, you can’t make your Soldiers listen to you, you can’t make them execute. To drive Soldiers to accomplish something truly complex, difficult or dangerous, you must lead them (Willink 2015).

### **Know Your Soldiers and Yourself**

Not only should you take ownership of your mission, take ownership of your Soldiers; know them, their strengths, weaknesses, and best ways to utilize them on your team and above all else, know their capabilities and test it each day. If you haven’t started professionally reading yet, I highly suggest it and a great article to start with would be, “Leadership and the Janitor”. I won’t ruin it for you but it is about a janitor at the Air Force Academy that was also a Medal of

Honor recipient. This story helped me greatly understand the concept of knowing my Soldiers and I still refer back to it to this day to remind me.

Some of the key elements I have learned from it is: Be cautious of labels and take time to know your people (Moschgat 2010); everyone on your team has different experiences, different skillsets, and strengths; learn how and when to apply them, that is your job. You're not trying to make everyone the perfect Soldier in your image, you instead need to build your team so that together, you can accomplish a myriad of missions effectively and bring everyone home. You may have a Soldier that runs a 12 minute two mile and the other that runs it in 20 minutes; both are equally important to the team. Do what you can to improve each Soldier but no Soldier is less valuable because of one test. Everyone is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid (Kelly 1955).

Leaders should be humble, no job is beneath them (Moschgat 2010). As a leader, you should always lead from the front and by example, never from a cubicle. In today's Army, being out with your Soldiers every day is understandably a hard task to accomplish; with this week's meeting, PowerPoint or some tracker that needs to be updated it's a mission in itself to actually train your Soldiers, but Sergeant, you have to do it. Like I said before, leadership is forged and not given; you forge it like you would a blade, through heat, pressure, and a lot of hard work and sweat. But I promise you, the outcome of your hard work and having a bond with your team is invaluable.

### **Commander's Intent**

No matter what else changes, one thing has remained consistent across the NCO Corps; understanding your Commander's Intent. Let me break down the importance of these two words for us NCOs: Knowing and Understanding your Commander's Intent is the scorecard of being a great NCO. Knowing this information allows you to train your Soldiers on their Individual and Collective Tasks with purpose, direction and understanding of the end state. As a First Sergeant taking over a new company, I witness Sergeant's Time Training as a "check the block" task with no purpose, guidance or motivation. Soldiers were blindly led through a few unrelated, improperly prepared training objectives that were in no way in support of the Commander and his intent. This is a problem. Needless to say, I revitalized this program.

If my METL and Commander's Intent tell me that I must perform a Convoy Live fire Exercise in third quarter, I as the NCO must understand in order to complete that task, I have to conduct Driver's Training, Convoy Operations Training, Communications Training and so forth. Understanding the end state, will assist you in gathering the buy-in of the Soldiers when you are conducting what otherwise would seem like mundane tasks with no meaning. In order for Soldiers to believe in their mission or training, it is important for them to understand what is expected of them and where it all leads. This is actually two-fold; if you are incapacitated for any reason, the next Soldier should be able to pick up where you left off and carry on with the mission, why? Because they understand the end state and take ownership, something you have taught them by example.

### **Take Initiative in the Absence of Guidance**

The NCO Creed is not just a few paragraphs that we have to memorize at one point in our career and regurgitate it for a few select occasions; it is full of guidance and leadership expectations. I challenge you to take the time to read it slowly, stop on occasion and let the words sink in; you should feel a monumental weight on your shoulders at the end of that. Being an NCO has importance, relevance and risk associated with it.

Taking Initiative is ownership; owning what you know needs to happen and executing it. In my Convoy Live Fire example previously, I didn't wait until someone told me to conduct drivers training, I didn't wait until maybe they would forget; I scheduled and conducted it. As NCOs, we must not avoid initiative because it causes more work, we must gather the respect and confidence of the seniors, peers and subordinates we have around us and do what's right. It causes more work because more work needs to be done, the readiness and lives of our Soldiers depend on it.

### **Understanding "Why"**

A social experiment or modern day fable that derived from experiments of G.R. Stephenson and Wolfgang Kohler in the 1920s gave us NCOs another useful tool for our toolbox. The fable goes like this: A group of scientists placed five monkeys in a cage, and in the middle, a ladder with bananas on top. Every time a monkey went up the ladder, the scientists soaked the rest of the monkeys with cold water. After a while, every time a monkey would start up the ladder, the others would pull it down and beat it up. After a time, no monkey would dare try climbing the ladder, no matter how great the temptation. The scientists then decided to replace one of the monkeys. The first thing this new monkey did was start to climb the ladder.

Immediately, the others pulled him down and beat him up. After several beatings, the new monkey learned never to go up the ladder, even though there was no evident reason not to, aside from the beatings. The second monkey was substituted and the same occurred. The first monkey participated in the beating of the second monkey. A third monkey was changed and the same was repeated. The fourth monkey was changed, resulting in the same, before the fifth was finally replaced as well. What was left was a group of five monkeys that – without ever having received a cold shower – continued to beat up any monkey who attempted to climb the ladder. If it was possible to ask the monkeys why they beat up on all those who attempted to climb the ladder, their most likely answer would be “I don’t know. It’s just how things are done around here.” (Obeng 2013).

Understand why we do things, this give us the insight of when it’s time to change and when we preserve history or traditions. You will find throughout your career that we give that answer a lot, “Why do we submit all this paperwork for leave?”, “I don’t know, it’s what they do here.” Be an NCO that owns the organization and finds out why we do things so that you can take the initiative to make a process faster, better or even obsolete.



### **In Summary**

The future is in your hands, the “back in my day” NCO will soon be you. How you build your future and your Soldiers is completely up to you. Something that is consistent in our ever changing Army, is the need for ownership in our ranks. Build the NCO Corps back up where it belongs and earn the trust, respect and confidence of your seniors, peers and subordinates alike. Know yourself, your strengths and limitations; supplement your team members to fill those gaps and create a strong, cohesive team. Recognizing your weaknesses shouldn't make you afraid, that is your ego; ego clouds and disrupts everything, leaders must leave their ego at the door (Willink 2015).

Don't buy-in to the hype that “we are not infantry”. There have been Soldiers with MOSs from Vet Tech to Driver that have unexpectedly found themselves face to face with the enemy in combat. One example is the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company and the Battle of Nasiriyah; I highly encourage all NCOs to read this document and take in the lessons learned. They were a maintenance company with “no possibility” of performing team and squad movements and react to contact in actual combat, but they did. After reading that story, ask yourself, “Are my Soldiers ready?”

## References

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