



“Leave Your Unit Better Than When You Came” – Leadership Lessons for Aspiring Commanding Officers

By COL Sebastian Chai

January 2024



“LEAVE YOUR UNIT BETTER THAN WHEN YOU CAME” – LEADERSHIP LESSONS FOR ASPIRING COMMANDING OFFICERS

By COL Sebastian Chai

ABSTRACT

There are many qualities that a Commanding Officer (CO) must possess in order for them to lead their unit well. In this essay, the author shares the seven key factors that he feels an aspiring CO needs to consider when drawing out their own action plan as they take on the role of a CO, in order for them to have a more meaningful CO tour in their career.

Keywords: Success; Failure; Leadership; Purpose; Career

INTRODUCTION

“My CO tour was the best tour of my SAF career!” was a phrase that I often heard senior officers say since I was a young junior officer. That motivated me to work hard to be a CO but I could never fully understand or appreciate what this statement meant until I had gone through it myself. Having been there and done that already, I can truly say that I am a believer. Before you start to think that it is all glamour and fun, let me stop you there and correct that misconception. It was far from a bed of roses. I experienced the lowest points of my career, yet I also gained the most satisfaction. What makes the CO tour so special? To sum it up in one sentence – you are vested with the authority and independence to lead and train your unit as you deem fit to achieve the mission, but at the same time, able to witness the tangible development in each and every single man and woman put under your charge. I do not profess to have a secret recipe to CO-ship, but I have learnt so much through my experiences, successes, and more importantly, failures that I hope will help shape you into the best leader that you can be. In writing this essay, I humbly hope to share seven simple pieces of advice for aspiring COs, so that you can think deeply and formulate your own action plan before you take on what will be the most meaningful tour of your career.

GIVE CREDIT FOR SUCCESSES AND TAKE OWNERSHIP FOR FAILURES

A CO is accountable for the outcomes of his or her unit, be it good or bad. No success is too small to celebrate. Give credit when credit is due. In a debrief or after action review, we often take success for granted and overly focus on what did not go too well and can be improved.

Similar to success, do not gloss over failure. There are usually good lessons to be learnt. When something goes wrong, the common tendency is to find fault and pin the blame on someone. It is easy to dismiss a mistake as an individual error and move on. But, that is the wrong thing to do. A CO needs to dig deeper and ask himself or herself some hard questions before coming to a conclusion. Did the individual commit the mistake because he or she was taught the wrong technique? Did the unit provide him or her with the necessary resources and guidance to do his or her job properly? Were there more systemic cultural issues at play? If you dig hard enough, you may find that there are other broader latent factors that resulted in the mistake. I recall an incident where one of my aircrew—an experienced instructor—came into close proximity with another aircraft in an air-to-air training engagement. The RSAF takes such incidents seriously and initiated an investigation. The investigation subsequently revealed that the main contributing factor was his over-

zealousness that resulted in a momentary lapse of judgement during the engagement. It was easy to leave it as that. But I kept asking myself if there was anything I could have done better as a CO to have prevented this incident. After much reflection, I attributed some of the blame on myself for not paying enough attention to him. I overly trusted him to be able to take care of himself because he was a senior aircrew. I failed to pick up signs of complacency. Had I been more observant, I would have been able to notice and arrest the trend. I took ownership for this failure and implemented some changes within the squadron to prevent a recurrence with other aircrews. I learnt a hard lesson and so did he. I am glad to see that he has since internalised his mistake, recovered from it, and is now doing well.

The CO needs to be able to convincingly explain to his or her people why and how the things that they do contribute to mission success. It must come from the CO for it to have meaning and weight.

REINFORCE THE SENSE OF PURPOSE

A sense of purpose in what we do is what keeps us engaged and motivated. We do not talk about it enough. Sometimes we are so caught up in the daily grind that we do not stop to reflect. The danger is that people may become demoralised, disgruntled, or in the worst case, disillusioned over time. The CO needs to be the one to reinforce the sense of purpose in his or her people, constantly looking for opportunities to relate their tough training or even mundane daily job to the larger mission. The CO needs to be able to convincingly explain to his or her people why and how the things that they do contribute to mission success. It must come from the CO for it to have meaning and weight.

I had the perfect opportunity to remind my squadron the meaning of our work, and I was determined to make full use of it. It was 9th August,

2019, our nation's 54th birthday. Our squadron was tasked for standby duty. We were the first line of air defence, ready to respond to any threats while the nation was celebrating at the Padang. It was a public holiday but our whole squadron was working. I gathered everyone at the aircraft shed. With our F-16 aircraft behind me and a projector screen beside me, I started my address to the squadron by showing two newspaper articles on the screen. The Straits Times articles were on the RSAF fighter aircraft successfully responding to two separate bomb threat incidents in April 2018 and March 2019. Those were real-life examples of our *raison d'être*—to defend Singapore's skies when called upon. I went on to tell everyone how important each and every single one of their responsibilities were. Every nut and bolt that the aircraft technician tightened was critical in ensuring that the aircraft could take off and land safely. Every phone call that the air operations specialist picked up could be the one that commanded our aircraft to launch. Finally, if the aircraft got airborne, it was down to the training of our aircrew to get the job done. It was a team effort, and everyone played a critical role in achieving mission success. I could see the pride in my people's eyes at the end of the night when we successfully completed our duty. Opportunities like this do not come often, so you must seize them when they do come around. Better still, create your own opportunities and do it regularly.

ENGAGE EARNESTLY AT ALL LEVELS

Former United States (US) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell once said, “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.”¹ These are wise words to live by. I have often heard leaders and bosses who just took over the appointment tell their subordinates that they have an open-door policy. But the reality is that subordinates will find it hard to walk into their bosses' office and openly share what is troubling them. They are afraid to be judged. Naturally. What the CO needs to do is to get out of his or her comfort zone and actively go out there to engage his or her subordinates at places where they feel most at ease. It may be their office, canteen or rest area.

They may not open up to you at the first instance. But if you keep doing it and when they sense your sincerity, you will gradually gain their trust.

I made it one of my command priorities to regularly meet all my subordinates in small groups. I would meet each group separately—the full-time National Servicemen (NSFs), junior Military Experts, junior aircrew, senior aircrew, instructor aircrew and the squadron management team. In each meeting, I deliberately kept out their supervisors. It was just them and I. My hope was that they would be more candid in their sharing if they were among peers only. There was no fixed format or agenda. It was a free-flowing conversation. I emphasised that there was no problem too small to raise. I always had my book and pen with me. I wrote down every single issue that was raised. I also told them that I would personally follow up and get back to them. I recall one of these sessions where an NSF highlighted to me that the walk from the bus stop along Tanah Merah Coast Road to the Squadron was very long and asked whether it was possible for the bus to make a short detour into Changi East Drive to the entrance of Changi Airbase (East). I thought it was a reasonable request as it was a short detour that would go a long way in boosting the morale of the NSFs. I

reached out to the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to make a case for it but got rejected. In my subsequent meeting with the NSFs, I told them that I had reached out to the LTA on the request and shared with them the reason why it was rejected. A few days later, I was pleasantly surprised to see the NSFs come to my office to thank me for trying. Words spread quickly, and since then I had others who plucked up the courage to knock on my door and ask, “Sir, can I speak to you?” At the end of the day, it is not about being able to solve everyone’s problems. The point is to show concern, listen, act on it and get back to the individual. As long as the individual knows that you genuinely care, you will earn their trust.

NURTURE THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

The key to nurturing the next generation of leaders is time. Some leaders mistake nurturing subordinates as purely giving them more work and exposure, such as assigning them secondary duties, appointing them as project leads, or giving briefings to senior commanders. These are important aspects of grooming, but the key ingredient is to take the time to guide your subordinates. Your subordinates have less work experience than you, and they know no better. Try



Winners of the 12th Air Combat Command Anniversary Sports Day Challenge in 2019.

to recall that you were once in their shoes, worrying whether you would succeed or fail. Your good intentions may even backfire if they ‘sink’ rather than ‘swim’ when thrown to the deep end. That said, you do not have to spoon feed them all the way and you should not. Instead, you should always give them clear guidance and advice on how to approach the tasking at the beginning. Closely monitor their progress. Along the way, always check in with them to help steer them along the right direction. At the end, provide constructive feedback on how they can improve in the future. It is time-consuming, but it is necessary.

Nurturing takes commitment and effort; emails can wait. I recall I was tasked to write the minutes for a meeting when I was a young junior officer. I was clueless on what was being discussed. I did not know many acronyms that was used and who was who. Not surprisingly, my minutes was atrocious. My Officer Commanding (OC) then had to spend a significant amount of time to vet through my minutes. I was very appreciative that he took the time to sit me down and go through line by line on why he made certain edits, even though he was extremely busy. He also shared with me some useful advice on how to think and write critically, which I still remember and practise till this day. I did the same when I was a CO. I would call my subordinate to my office, put up my version of the document and my subordinate’s version side-by-side on the computer screen, and explain my rationale for my edits. It took more than an hour at times. I am not sure

how much they took away from such sessions, but as long as they took away something, I am satisfied. On leadership, I was particularly grateful for the one-on-one conversations that I had with my ex-bosses where they candidly shared their experiences as a CO. When I became a CO, I made it a point to find out who were going for their CO and OC interview boards. For those who I knew personally or have worked together before, I would offer to meet them to share my thoughts and experiences on being a CO and OC. It was not to teach them how to pass the board, but rather to help sharpen their thinking on what it means to be a commander. I became the CO that I was because of the guidance, coaching, and mentorship of the many good bosses that I had over the years. Now, think of the good bosses that you had in your career thus far and how they nurtured you. Next, remember to pay it forward when you become a CO.

For a CO to demand strong fundamentals and high standards from his or her subordinates, he or she must first lead by example and show them that he or she demands the same of himself or herself.



Then-LTC Sebastian Chai (front row, 4th from right) during an overseas deployment with his unit.

ANCHOR STRONG FUNDAMENTALS AND HIGH STANDARDS

There is a saying, ‘the standard that you walk past is the standard that you accept.’² You may not be conscious about this, but everything that you do or do not do, and say or do not say, is watched very closely by your subordinates. If you see one of your subordinates with an unacceptable haircut or dirty boots and you do not say a thing, it becomes the new bearing standard of the unit. If you see one of your subordinates leaving classified documents lying around and you do not say a thing, it becomes the new security standard of the unit. Every small little thing matters. The CO sets the tone, not your management team, instructors or command chief. Anchoring strong fundamentals and high standards starts with the CO. It starts on Day 1 of your CO-ship. Be critical. Address mistakes immediately on the spot so that it does not insidiously develop into something more systemic.

For a CO to demand strong fundamentals and high standards from his or her subordinates, he or she must first lead by example and show them that he or she demands the same of himself or herself. A CO that only knows how to sit on his or her own throne and expects the best from his or her people without holding himself or herself to the same is one without moral courage. He or she will not be able to gain the respect of his or her subordinates. Let me share a story. There is a segment in the daily squadron operations brief called the ‘Lessons Learnt’ where aircrew would come to the front of the room and share with the entire squadron the mistakes that they made in previous flights. The intent of the sharing was not to embarrass anyone, but rather to learn from each other’s mistakes and hopefully not repeat them for subsequent flights. However, it always seemed that it was only the junior aircrew who were sharing their mistakes. It was as though the senior aircrew and instructors did not make mistakes. More realistically, it was probably due to their pride of not willing to admit that they made a mistake in front of everyone. I wanted to change that. Everyone makes mistakes, including myself. What is more

important than one’s ego is to be humble and openly share so that others may learn. Someone’s sharing can help another to improve or may even save their life one day. I started to stand in front of the squadron to share the mistakes I made, why I made them, and how I could improve for subsequent flights. I could see some surprised looks, but maybe that was because seeing the CO put himself out there was not something that they were used to. I was glad to see my squadron management team and instructors doing the same thing over time too. Collectively, that is how we improve together as a squadron.

DO THE RIGHT THINGS AND DO THINGS RIGHT

A CO must lead with integrity to be able to command respect from his/her people. A 2016 Forbes study on leadership found that many viewed ‘integrity’ as the most important attribute in a leader, above other attributes such as ‘fairness’ and ‘transparency’.³ Whether you like it or not, you are constantly being judged by your subordinates. They can easily tell if you are doing something for your own personal benefit. They can easily tell if you are trying to profile yourself at the expense of the unit. They can easily tell if you are trying to cover things up so that it does not jeopardise your own career. The moment that you start to exhibit such behaviours, you are going down a slippery slope. Where does it stop? You start to lose the moral high ground to call out unacceptable behaviour. While you may get away with it, the worst thing is that you have set the wrong example for your subordinates. They will think that such behaviour is acceptable, and they may follow suit when they become leaders in the future.

I recall an incident within the first month of my CO tour that tested my resolve to do the right things and do things right. I was planned for a flight that day. When I went to the aircraft, I rejected it because one of the aircraft systems was functioning out of its limits. When I explained to the aircraft logistician about the issue that I faced, he told me that there was a revision by the Original Equipment Manufacturer that such a phenomenon was no longer a cause for concern. He showed me the aircraft technical manual, which I noted that the revision was promulgated more than a year

ago. It was an honest mistake on my part, but one that could have been prevented if I had been more diligent in revising the aircraft technical manual from time to time. I could have left it as that and moved on. But I thought that the right thing to do was to report the incident through our RSAF-wide Safety Information System (the RSAF Safety Information System, or SIS in short, is a platform to share details of accidents or incidents that occurred on the ground or in the air), to share my mistake so that others who might also be ignorant of this revision would become aware of it. The broader lesson for others was to constantly refresh oneself on the aircraft manuals and not solely rely on memory or corporate knowledge. While there were no serious consequences in my incident, I could not live with the fear that one day an ignorant aircrew could erroneously react to a similar phenomenon during a critical phase of flight, mishandle the aircraft in the midst, and as a result put himself or herself in danger because I did not share this incident. On a personal level, I was disappointed that I, as the CO of my squadron, made such an avoidable mistake and contributed the first Human Factors incident (for the less informed, Human Factors is a term to describe

safety incidents that are mainly due to human error) under my charge. But at the end of the day, I had no doubt that this was the morally right thing to do.

The litmus test of a strong unit safety culture is when people continue to adhere to directives, orders, and standard operating procedures even though no one is looking.

ESTABLISH STRONG STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

Establishing strong structures and processes is particularly important for building a strong unit safety culture. The litmus test of a strong unit safety culture is when people continue to adhere to directives, orders, and standard operating procedures even though no one is looking. The unit continues to function at a consistent level even when the CO is not around. On the contrary, a unit that is run based on the whims and fancies of the CO, depending on which side of the bed he or she wakes



Then-LTC Sebastian Chai (front row, 6th from right) with his unit at Changi Air Base (East).

up from, is likely to get into trouble. Especially during times of adversity and crisis, there are leaders who will default to running their units based on fear and punishment to clamp down hard on mistakes. It may work in the short run. But in the long run, people will start to take shortcuts or let their guard down when the CO is not watching. As a CO, your responsibility is not to leave things to chance.

During my time as a CO, Fighter Group as a whole was going through a rough patch. There was a spate of Human Factors incidents that could have resulted in serious consequences. We conducted safety workshops and discussion sessions to delve deeply into each incident, to sieve out all the factors that contributed to the incident. We reviewed case studies of similar past incidents, to refresh past lessons learnt. But I felt that more could be done for individuals to internalise safety. If not, the natural tendency was to forget over time and the vicious cycle would repeat itself. Therefore, I instituted a new process for flight briefs. It was simple. At the start of the flight brief, each aircrew was to concisely share, in no more than 30 seconds, one safety watch area for himself or herself for that particular flight and how they planned to mitigate it. All too often in the flight brief, the aircrew would be overly focused on the tactical aspects of achieving the objectives for the flight and not much attention would be placed on briefing the more mundane non-tactical portions of the

flight, deconfliction among aircrafts, and potential aircraft emergencies. The intent of this initiative was for each aircrew to take a step back, look at the whole flight in its entirety, identify one area that could seriously get them into trouble if they were not careful, and to be mindful about it subsequently in flight. It was not just for the junior aircrew, but for every aircrew in the squadron, including myself, that flew. Coincidentally or not, my squadron was fortunate not to experience a major Human Factors incident since then.

CONCLUSION

To sum it up, I had one simple motto that guided me throughout my CO tour—“Leave my unit better than when I came in.” One of my ex-bosses previously said that a true measure of success for a leader is when his or her unit continues to perform well even after he or she relinquishes the appointment. I dare not claim that my unit is better than when I first took over, as this is for my superiors, peers, and subordinates to judge. But as I reflect on my CO tour while writing this essay, I can truly touch my heart to say that I have given my all in trying. I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. To all aspiring COs, remember that it is always about the mission and your men. There will be good days and there will be bad days. But you can make a difference. As long as your heart is in the right place in achieving the mission and taking care of your men, you will become the CO that your unit deserves. I wish you the very best in your CO tour!

ENDNOTES

1. Powell, Colin & Persico Joseph E (1995). My American Journey. New York: Random House, p. 52.
2. vivid2. “David Morrison (2013) Speech Transcript: The standard you walk past is the standard you accept,” 13 August 2021, <https://vividmethod.com/transcript-the-standard-you-walk-past-is-the-standard-you-accept/#:~:text=I%20will%20be%20ruthless%20in,rank%2C%20have%20a%20leadership%20role>.
3. Victor Lipman (2016). The most important leadership attribute? New study has clear answer. 25 May 2016 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2016/10/25/the-most-important-leadership-attribute-new-study-has-clear-answer/?sh=78fb61184df2>



COL Sebastian Chai is currently the Head of Air Intelligence Department. He is a fighter pilot by vocation and was the Commanding Officer of 145 Squadron from 2019 to 2020. He holds a Master of Mechanical Engineering from Imperial College London, and a Master of Public Administration from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He also graduated as a Distinguished Graduate from the United States Air Force's Air Command and Staff College in 2018.