
Chapter 8.

Field-Grade Officers

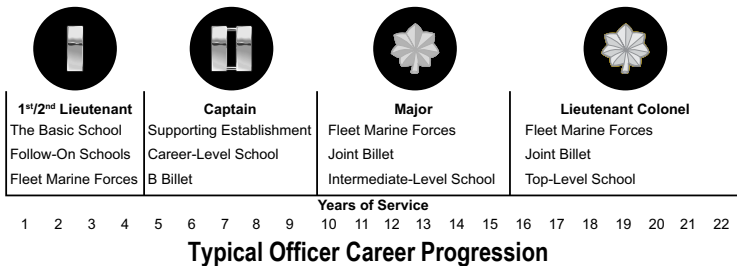
Field-grade officers represent the small percentage of individuals selected for the next level of Marine Corps officership. With even more academic and professional experience under their belts, field-grade officers serve as the bridge between general officers and junior officers. They work at the strategic level, participating in higher-level operational planning teams, while still dominating at the tactical level, directing young captains and lieutenants in tasks that they, themselves, have mastered. The value of the field-grade level lies in diversity of experience. They have the maturity and wisdom to lead the Corps into the future. To this point, these officers should seek continued growth in their leadership abilities, avoid complacency, and pursue higher education, all while influencing and shaping the future Marine Corps.

CONTINUED GROWTH AS A LEADER

For many officers, the decision to remain in the service or return to civilian life is made in the early years. Influenced by their experiences, mentors, individual goals, and their own performance, they choose one path or another for their future. Other times, the path is chosen for them, such as when the institution determines they have not met the desired criteria of a Marine leader. For those whose service comes to an end, they have done what few could accomplish: held the impressive title of Marine and gained the valuable experience that comes with it.

They did their part and will continue to serve their country as a citizen. Those who decide to remain in the Marine Corps add a layer of maturity, drive, and knowledge to the officer corps. Unlike their enlisted counterparts, there is no longer time requirement for any obligated service. They can no longer say, “I am trying it out” or, “We will see how it goes.” They have made a conscious decision to accept each new assignment, indefinitely.

As Marine officers gain experience in the Corps and earn promotions, their responsibilities increase. As responsibility increases, the potential effect officers can have on Marines does, too. Instead of a new lieutenant affecting a small section or platoon of Marines, a major can influence an entire battalion, squadron, regiment, or group. There may also be the opportunity to lead more than just Marines. Joint environments bring other Services and civilians under their responsibility, which requires adaptability in leadership style. The potential influence a field-grade officer can have on the institution demands that officers approach their own growth and development with gravity and sincerity. The figure below shows some of the potential areas for growth in an officer’s career.



MCDP 7 *Learning* states—

*As Marines rise in rank and position, continuous learning and developing our professional skills are a professional expectation. We must make the most of every learning opportunity, fostering our subordinates' learning while continuing our own.*³³

Learning takes place in different ways for different individuals. Learning can take place in a classroom through continuing graduate education studies, or in the field through training exercises and practical application. It takes place through professional military education and collaboration with peers, and potentially in every conversation and experience that occur during the mundane hours of the day. The quickest way to experience transformative learning is through challenge. It may be taking on new physical challenges beyond the Marine Corps standards or being professionally challenged with a more senior assignment. In times of challenge and struggle, the mind is forced to use creativity, innovation, and out-of-the-box thinking to find a solution; the ego is forced to face humility; and character is developed through determination and persistence. All of these experiences are not only beneficial, but essential, for the Marine leader's growth. The point at which an uncomfortable task or activity becomes comfortable is the indication that the Marine has mastered that ability and it is now time to seek out the next challenge and opportunity to learn. Continued personal development throughout a Marine's career helps fuel professional development, sustaining their transformation as a Marine.

By the time Marines become field-grade officers, certain actions are second nature. Requirements like understanding acronyms, briefing during a command and staff meeting, organizing battalion formations, understanding the material readiness brief, communicating with the monitor, or grading a fitness report are no longer daunting. What seemed like an impossible mountain to climb at first is now a scalable wall. They may have been through deployments, integrated training exercises, mountain warfare training exercises, jungle warfare exercises, weapons tactics instruction, and other testing events. Their knowledge base is high, and their abilities have steadily improved. However, an increase in competence is not an excuse for complacency. In every grade, Marines must remain engaged and committed to excellence.

Avoiding Complacency

Over time, developing confidence in themselves and their abilities can lure individuals into a false sense of security. They are not bound by a date on a calendar or a renewed oath of commitment. The threat of apathy and complacency is always just around the corner. Field-grade officers are responsible for avoiding complacency within themselves and discouraging it in those around them. They can do this by renewing their commitment with each new duty station or assignment.

Complacency comes from the comfort zone. During the early years of service, the comfort zone is nowhere to be found because tasks and activities are new, exciting, daunting, and challenging. Just when Marines feel they are starting to get the hang of something, they are given new billets, taught new skill sets, or

sent to new training environments. There is no time or opportunity to become complacent because it would mean the end of all they've worked for. Once they've settled into a new position and become adjusted to the day-to-day operations of their role, the comfort zone returns. Rote familiarity with standing operating procedures, mastered skills and abilities, and reduced performance competition can signal the start of leniency in training and mission accomplishment.

“One definition of complacency is a feeling of quiet pleasure or security, while unaware of some potential danger, defect or the like; self-satisfaction with an existing situation, condition, etc. Another less lofty definition is failure to pay attention to details; failure to conduct an adequate risk assessment resulting in negligence, bodily harm and destruction to property.”³⁴

—Gen Mark A. Milley

The effects of complacency have been seen all too often in every area of the Corps. Some of the biggest lessons are unfortunately learned through tragedy. Every Marine, but particularly those in positions of authority, must study these stories and compare them to their own actions. Have you allowed yourself to become complacent? Below are some of the ways complacency has manifested throughout Marine Corps history:

- Marines Killed in Beirut, Lebanon, 1982-1984: Marine senior leaders assumed force protection and security procedures were adequate and being handled by forces outside their command.

Their failure to assess the capabilities and limitations of both friendly and enemy forces resulted in a deadly enemy attack.

- Marines Killed in Training Event, 2013: Leaders at multiple levels failed to ensure Marines had received adequate training prior to participating in a night exercise. Human error while conducting standing operating procedures resulted in multiple Marines being killed.
- Marines Killed in Accidental Weapons Discharges: Negligent discharges occurred during weapons cleaning or function testing due to complacency with weapons handling and safety. These mishaps have resulted in numerous deaths, disfigurements, and permanent disability.

In 2021, the Marine Corps created a “mishap library,” which is available through MarineNet. This allows all Marines the ability to review cases of often-preventable tragedies and learn from them. At the very least, complacency creates low morale and missed opportunity. At worst, it costs lives. To remain vigilant in warfighting as well as in garrison is vital to adaptability in the modern fighting force. Apathy dulls the senses to subtle opportunities for growth and justifies self-absolution of the responsibility of leadership. Sustaining the transformation as a Marine staves off complacency by requiring the pursuit of excellence and advancement at every level and every stage of their careers.

SUSTAINING SELF

Higher Education

For the field-grade officer, continuing education is necessary to maintain warfighting capabilities. Earning master's degrees or doctorates, or attending institutions like the Marine Corps Command and Staff College will not only expand their library of knowledge, but will also expose them to individuals of different backgrounds and ideas. Field-grade officers should make a concerted effort to frequently reengage in educational opportunities to attain fresh ideas and perspectives. Research and development in the areas of technology, psychology, leadership, and tactics are continuously evolving and leaders need to remain engaged in these changes.

In Ian Leslie's book, *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It*, (a book in the Commandant's Reading List archive) the author, a human behavior specialist, addresses ignorance in two ways. In the first, he describes the "ignorant but happy" effect: "When people are confident that they have the answers they become blithely incurious about alternatives."³⁵ As in the past, the Marine Corps of the future will demand much from its field-grade officers. Like the seasoned SNCO, they are in the prime of leadership—they possess years of accrued experience and time to use it. Neither the individual nor the organization can afford to have ignorant leaders. The continual pursuit of higher education, and the application of the knowledge gained, will help Marines stay engaged, relevant, and effective, thereby sustaining their transformation.

Ian Leslie also states, “Ignorance as a deliberate choice, can be used to reinforce prejudice and discrimination.”³⁶ Refusing to continue one’s education results in a narrow scope of knowledge and understanding. Engaging in intellectual debate, hearing the insights of others, and being exposed to new ideas all help the Marine officer relate to others. On a global scale, it improves their relationship with allies and partners. On a professional level, it allows them to better train and understand their Marines. On a personal level, it creates a greater sense of satisfaction in performance and interpersonal relationships. A well-rounded education is a key component of a well-rounded Marine.

Numerous educational opportunities are available for Marine officers and can be found through the Marine Corps or civilian institutions. The flyer on page 8-9 highlights one of these opportunities at the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare. For the most proficient field-grade officers, joint duty or cross-service education is a possibility. Successful selection on any one of a variety of military educational boards can provide PME opportunities for their next rank, joint service experience, or a master's degree in their chosen field of study. This not only sets them up for success in the Marine Corps but makes them more competitive upon their eventual departure from the Marine Corps. Marine officers are never satisfied with being average, and education continues to set them apart from their peers in and out of the Marine Corps.

Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare

Mission

Inspired by its namesake, the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation and Future Warfare enables an interdisciplinary approach to complex problem solving, fosters an environment that enhances our collective warfighting capability, and facilitates and encourages novel solutions to current and future warfighting challenges in order to expand the Corps' competitive edge and improve our warfighting effectiveness.

Non-Resident Fellows Program

The Krulak Center is a think tank at the Marine Corps University focused on creating enhanced educational opportunities for students and faculty engaged in professional military education. Our mission is to enable an interdisciplinary approach to support all students and faculty through complex problem solving, fostering an environment that enhances the collective warfighting capability, and facilitating and encouraging novel solutions to current and future warfighting challenges to expand the Corps' competitive edge and improve our warfighting effectiveness. Krulak Center non-resident fellows support the mission of the Krulak Center as needed and able.

Non-resident fellows participate in the annual Innovation Summit; support instruction at the university by visiting the campus; virtually contribute to Krulak Center events, and support writing competitions. All Krulak Center non-resident fellows can collaborate with MCU staff, faculty, and the Marine Corps University Foundation; participate in wargames; and support staff rides.³⁷

SUSTAINING OTHERS

Shaping the Corps

Being a field-grade officer means using the experiences and skills accrued throughout the first few years of service to benefit the organization. Those who have the mentality of “working for the Marines” build the Marine Corps to even higher possibilities of greatness.

As the executors of orders and policies, field-grade officers now also create them. They understand the “why” behind decisions they may not have understood before and are reinforcing those decisions to ensure they work. However, as officers progress higher in rank, they also become more removed from enlisted Marines. Focusing on the operational and strategic levels of war has many positives when it comes to broadening one’s scope and military prowess; however, losing touch with the troops on the ground can have a negative effect on a unit’s readiness and mission. A leader’s decisions can direct how Marines spend the hours of their lives, and the quality of that time. Because of this, field-grade officers must occasionally recalibrate their leadership compasses to validate their approach to leading Marines and ensure serving the institution is not just in line with the Marines’ and unit’s mission, but also with their own personal standards. As field-grade officers, majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels shape the present and future Marine Corps upward through policies and Corps-wide directives, and downward through direct

interaction with their Marines. As with SNCOs, the tremendous influence of this intermediate position should not be taken lightly or underestimated.

For officers serving as commanders and directors, the options for shaping the Corps are widely varied. Captains often serve as company commanders, officer selection officers, and TBS instructors. Majors can hold billets as battalion executive officers, recruiting station commanders, and regional affairs officers. As a lieutenant colonel, they may fill the role of squadron commander, Marine expeditionary unit executive officer, or schoolhouse director. By the time they are colonels these Marines are assigned to positions like regimental commander, Commandant of Midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy, or chief of staff. Whether leading Marines, training aspiring Marines, interacting with the international community, or influencing Corps directives and policies, their decisions and actions have far-reaching effects every day. It is with this in mind that one's thoughts and behavior should be under strict scrutiny and discipline. Corrections not made become standards now accepted—for others and self. On the battlefield, the senior officers make strategic decisions about who to send into the fray. A young lieutenant may lead the charge, but it was the lieutenant colonel who decided to send that company to face the enemy. Marines from the most junior private to the most senior general must be able to trust in the judgment and integrity of those making life and death decisions. Accountability is key as others look to senior officers to be paragons of morality and virtue and uphold the standards they prescribe.

The opportunities to create policies, testify to Congress, or lead in battle are in small proportion to the one-on-one interactions had on a regular basis. For example, a large boulder when dropped into a pond creates one large circle of ripples, but a handful of small pebbles create a multitude of them. Though individually smaller, these ripples mesh with each other, creating new patterns and affecting each other even after the original pebble was thrown. So it is with the leadership of field-grade officers: they have the opportunity and access to direct consequential “large boulders,” but also carry a “handful of pebbles” each day that may have a greater affect on their Marines.

One of these “pebbles” that can affect myriad others is mentoring junior officers. Field-grade officers welcome new Marine officers at their units and remember how they felt on their first assignment. It is up to them to

“If something small that I do helps or makes a difference, tell me what it is and I’ll do more of it.”
—BGen Lorna Mahlock³⁸

step in, create a positive first impression, and establish a solid relationship. Whether or not they had this for themselves, shaping this moment in a new officer’s career might establish a positive tradition, which that officer, in turn, can pass on to future officers. Mentoring new officers helps reaffirm their commitment to the Marine Corps, reinforces unit culture, and supports them during the beginning of their career. Doing this builds the Marine Corps to be a better organization.

A second “pebble” is taking the lead on upholding the core values and leadership traits and principles. Even though times of close

and personal interaction with lower-ranking enlisted Marines becomes less and less frequent as the officer rises in rank, this only raises the importance of those interactions. In each conversation, unit formation, ceremony, or disciplinary action, Marines scrutinize the words and actions of their leaders. Treating others with respect whether or not they are present, keeping a neat and presentable uniform, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, being proficient and knowledgeable in their work, and holding themselves to the same standards they hold their Marines are some of the ways leaders influence those around them on a daily basis. As the old adage goes, “Actions speak louder than words.” Seeing the integrity of their leaders inspires other Marines to do the right thing. By contrast, hypocrisy in leaders creates the space for misconduct to seem excusable. It is the small ripples of momentary interactions that influence scores of Marines for years to come, ultimately shaping the future of the entire Marine Corps.