



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Encounters of a New Lieutenant

“No man is a leader until he is ratified in the minds and hearts of his men.”

– *Infantryman Journal*

*JCO/NCO: Why should I trust the new Lieutenant?*

*Company Commander: Can I trust the new Lieutenant?*

*Commanding Officer: Will the new Lieutenant be able to perform this task independently?*

These are certain questions that every new Lieutenant has to face before he is considered part of the team and trusted by both his juniors and seniors.

Trust is a small but very potent link between two different minds. This article attempts to comprehend the link with the men you command or the senior whose order you ought to follow. The primary aim is to make the new Lieutenant understand the intricacies of making oneself acceptable and most importantly trusted by the Chain of Command. The paper also includes small anecdotes that help to maintain the flow. There are numerous occasions where one would find, small but significant remarks, which invokes the insight



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### Key Points

- Trust is a very potent link in the chain of command.
- Few of the most important commandments, to be followed by a new Lieutenant are covered here.
- The three fundamental elements of trust are ability, integrity and compassion. The convergence of these three dimensions is where trust truly exists.
- Company Commanders value those who can build teams and work with others and not just those who can do jobs well themselves.
- Every army Leadership Doctrine puts professional competence at the heart of the Army Leadership Framework.
- An Officer is always on parade and you always will be looked upon by the men you Command.

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## Encounters of...

of the characteristics, which an individual creates in and around his environment. A few of these remarks are as follows:

*Lieutenant Smart: You are a very poor administrator.*

*Lieutenant Utkrisht: Why are you always lost?*

Young officers, despite the basic and specialist training that spans over 1 to 4 years, still needs to comprehend a lot about the basics of how the platoon, company and battalion functions.

With so much to work on and learn, it is a miracle to trust a new Lieutenant; and as amusing as that might seem, it is an important issue. Strong and effective leadership is underpinned by trust. For a new leader, it means being trusted by the men he commands and by his Company Commander at the same time.

The dictionary meaning of the word Lieutenant is—‘A deputy or substitute acting for Superior’, which means he is the man who needs to understand the mind and articulate the directions of his Company Commander and convince his juniors, i.e. the men he is commanding.<sup>1</sup> But what comes out of this Preamble, is the single most important element with regards to the existence of the new Lieutenant and that is TRUST.

In my military career of over twenty years, there have been numerous occasions when I’ve been struck by the importance of trust in the Chain of Command. The first was, when I joined my first unit after my training at the Indian Military Academy. As a Lieutenant, I wondered what it was that led a Battery Commander (Artillery equivalent of Company Commander) to trust a newly commissioned Lieutenant like me.

The second was four years later, as a Company, Second-in-Command in Rashtriya Rifles Battalion in an intense counter-insurgency environment. I noticed that some of my peers, from different arms and services, were given significant freedom to operate and some were not. Put simply, those who were trusted by their Chain of Command had freedom of action, to accomplish their mission. It was a mission

command based on trust or enforced due to lack of it.<sup>2</sup>

The gap in experience and understanding between a Company Commander and a new Lieutenant is huge. How can a Company Commander trust a new Lieutenant, when the Lieutenant is inexperienced and has little knowledge of his abilities? And yet, some of them are highly trusted. They take the benefit of being given genuine independent tasks. By contrast, others are not. They receive more supervision, feel more constrained and have fewer opportunities to contribute to the effectiveness of the Company. They also find being a young Lieutenant significantly less enjoyable.

### Being Trustworthy

The three fundamental elements of trust are ability, integrity and compassion. The convergence of these three dimensions is where trust truly exists.

The importance of being trusted is, however, not just that it makes a new Lieutenant’s job more easier. The basic tenants of mission command, rapid decentralised action, following a Commanders’ intent are most importantly based on mutual trust. The Lieutenants who are trusted have a significant advantage when it comes to operating and winning in combat. Being trusted is an essential part of creating the unity of effort and the winning tempo that modern combat requires. But inspite of all this, the fact remains that Company Commanders trusts their juniors to different extents, often depending on the task and the circumstances.

Thus, in this article, I aim to get to the bottom of the question—“What leads Company Commanders and the JCOs / NCOs to trust their new, young and supposedly inexperienced Lieutenants?”

To home down to the bottom of this most critical issue with regards to junior leadership and especially in today’s ‘self-centric’ social environment, I interacted with my peers, JCOs / NCOs and seniors in various arms and services and most importantly the young, dynamic and energetic Lieutenants. My tenure as the Instructor-

in-Gunnery at the Alma Matter of Gunners, the School of Artillery gave me bounteous opportunities to intermingle with a number of these young minds, which helped me in consolidating these thoughts. In my interactions, I came across varied reasons, as to why previous Company Commanders trusted one young officer over another. Taken together, these reasons provide an insight into what Chain of Command ranging from the NCOs to the Commanding Officers value in their Lieutenants, why they trust them and what these young officers need to do if they want to be trusted more (Table 1).

**Table 1. Building Trust**

Building Trust
Self-Sacrificing
Understand the Commander's Intent
Affirm Mistakes
Reliability
Demonstrate Emotional Intelligence
Be Competent
Dependability
Disciplined
Meticulous
Courage of Conviction
REPUTATION MATTERS

Source: Author's own representation

## Thoughts that Matter

The discussions bring to the fore some important questions, which a Company Commander generally considers while analysing the trust coefficient of a new Lieutenant. These are:

- Is he (the Lieutenant) trusted by the men he commands?
- Is he (the Lieutenant) competent with the right skills, knowledge and attributes?
- Does he (the Lieutenant) believe in professional honesty? Does he approach, brief and challenge me?

These questions seem to have obvious answers. On the other hand, my discussions led me to analyse these questions from the perspective of the people whom

he commands. It is easy to say that the Company Commander trusts a hardworking, diligent, truthful and dedicated leader with an appealing personality who is liked by all. But is it so easy? Apparently, NO. Thus, I am making an attempt to bring to fore what Company Commanders mean by cited questions. The subsequent paragraphs cover in detail the ten essential ingredients of becoming a trustworthy officer, which the Chain of Command desires each one to possess.

- **Be Self-Sacrificing:** Commanders at all levels believes that those who put their people and mission first, deliver the best outcomes for their Company. They must selflessly put the needs of their mission and soldiers above themselves, friendships and enjoyment. This brings us to the Chetwode Credo taught at the Indian Military Academy—"Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time."

Nearly half of the discussions which I had described, 'selflessness' makes an important contribution for trusting a new Lieutenant. Company Commanders believe that, when Lieutenants put their soldiers before themselves, the soldiers will return the commitment, building a stronger team. One highly trusted Lieutenant "loved and cared for their soldiers and was selflessly committed to them, in return the soldiers supported him in tough circumstances". Another Lieutenant's "compassion build a team most would envy. When something went wrong, their whole team helped them unravel it."

Other trusted Lieutenant displayed loyalty to the mission over their personal relationships'. Company Commanders trusted those who could balance the needs of the mission or task against their relationships with their peers, JCOs/NCOs and soldiers. Trusted Lieutenants have a productive relationship with their JCOs/NCOs that brings out the best from both parties. They display moral, courage in the way they dealt with their soldiers.

It is only worth putting the mission first if you understand what the mission is all about. This leads to the next point.





- **Understand Higher Commander's Intent:** It is good to be talented, but if you are applying it in the wrong place then you are not helping the team move forward. To be trusted, make sure you understand your Company Commander's intent and work towards it.

A quarter of people whom I interacted with, mentioned understanding the higher Commander's intent as one of the important ingredient. They explained that a trusted Lieutenant acts "in line with the bigger picture" and "understands their contribution to it". Untrusted platoon Commanders either did not understand the intent (through lack of ability or interest) or carried out the task according to what they have understood. For example, if they didn't understand the intent, instead of seeking clarification, they carry out the task according to their understanding to the best of their abilities. Even the most selfless Lieutenants, who put their needs last all the time, will not be fully trusted unless they focus on their effort towards their unit's objective. As well as putting their mission first, they have to know what the mission is.

#### Understanding 'The Chain of Command'

During a training exercise, the Lieutenant who was driving down a muddy back road encountered another car stuck in the mud with a red-faced Colonel at the wheel.

"Your car struck, Sir?" Asked the Lieutenant as he pulled alongside.

"Nope", replied the Colonel, coming over and handing him the keys. "Your's is."

- **Affirm your Mistakes:** Making mistakes is a normal part of a young military Commander's development. But if you try and hide the mistake and let it fester and grow into a more serious problem, then it is not good. Not getting in quickly to admit a mistake is 'untrustworthy' and 'self-serving'.

Making mistakes was regularly mentioned but not in the way you might have thought. Barely any former Company Commanders, whom I interacted with, distrusted those who made mistakes; most of them thought it is a natural part of learning to be a military commander.

But plenty of them was crystal clear about the fact that, if a Lieutenant made a mistake and would not come forward to quickly admit it, they could not be trusted. Admitting mistakes not only demonstrates honesty but also creates the opportunity for the team to recover from the mistake instead of it developing into a more serious issue. Where Lieutenants hid their mistakes, the Company Commander(s) believed they were limiting the damage to themselves, instead of limiting any damage to the Company or the mission. This is another form of selfishness.

- **Be Reliable:** If a young Lieutenant is operating away from his chain of command, he will have unparalleled freedoms. His Company Commander cannot supervise him. If you find yourself in that situation make sure you act as an ambassador for your unit. If you cannot be trusted when there is no one around to supervise, you will never end up in that situation again.

Company Commanders are clear that, reliability is an important ingredient for being trusted. However, when a Lieutenant is operating at an arm's length from their boss, reliability is particularly important. It says something about whether they are acting with the right intentions. It could be when they are operating under another unit or when they are based in another geographic location. Whichever it is, experienced Company Commanders will not trust those who abused the freedom of being away from observation. This is so particularly when their actions damaged the reputation of the Company or Unit.

#### Journey in a Train

**Lieutenant Utkrisht:** *Yaar, nobody is seeing, you can drink as much as you want.*

**Lieutenant Slow:** *Na bhai, we should not drink in train. What will be our impression on others?*

**Lieutenant Utkrisht:** *Chal, Darpok.*

A few days after, Lieutenant Utkrisht catches a jawan drinking in lines and he scolds him like anything.

**Hav Ustad:** *Saab, jab aap train mein daroo pee sakte ho to mein kyun nahin?*

What can Lt Utkrisht do now?

If a Lieutenant acts poorly when he is unsupervised but under external scrutiny, he is demonstrating selfishness and the lack of self-discipline. This is when distrust follows. The men he commands would follow suit and most importantly, he will receive distrust when he wants it the most, i.e. during the execution of a mission.

- **Demonstrate Some Emotional Intelligence<sup>3</sup>:** More than anything else, Company Commanders value those who can build teams and work with others and not just those who can do jobs well themselves. So, if you are a new Lieutenant, you need to work hard on building relationships across the unit. Leadership is a team sport. Show that you can form relationships that build value.

When it comes to the idea of competence, Company Commanders clearly value one trait above all others and that is emotional intelligence or the ability to build an effective working relationship. He has to build relationships across the Company, so that he has his finger on the pulse and thus, could get things done through his personal relationships with others which he creates through his social bonds.

There is plenty of literature on emotional intelligence but it is worth focussing on why Company Commanders trusted those who they thought had it. This is because they build relationships that helped them get things done. If you built a rapport with the movers and shakers you will be able to navigate the organisation. If you cannot build functioning human relationships with your men you will be far less effective.

- **Be Competent – Technical, Tactical and Administrative Prowess:** Company Commanders trust Lieutenants who can master their profession. Be good at what you do, but do not neglect the less exciting aspects of your job. Be competent in the field; understand the doctrine; know the technical requirements of your job; and know how to lead, manage and administer your men in barracks too. A Company Commander will not trust an officer who cannot do the assigned task.

The importance of professional competence is no surprise. Any army Leadership Doctrine puts

professional competence at the heart of the Army Leadership Framework. This is again an important commandment, but more importantly, not only the Company Commander but the men you command should trust and respect a competent Lieutenant.

Tactical and technical competence is the key to the success of combat leadership. Trusted Lieutenants are professionally effective and capable in the field, which is their main role and purpose or they deeply understood ‘why’ their organisations did things – they understand tactics, doctrine and have deep technical knowledge. Distrusted ones have standard military skills and fieldcraft that are so poor that they could not be trusted to keep the soldiers safe. As a result, the effectiveness of the Company suffers in operations.

But do not get the impression that leading troops in war is everything that matters to a Company Commander. Competence at the administrative routine role is important to them too. Several of the experienced Company Commanders specifically mentioned that they were not only interested in tactical ability but also professional competence across the board. They trusted those who were “competent and confident across the full spectrum of his responsibilities and not just in the field”.

- **Be Dependable:** The quality of a Lieutenant’s output matters, but so does their ability to consistently deliver that quality. If you produce low-quality or inconsistent output you will need and receive, additional oversight from your Company Commander. If you want to be trusted, demonstrate consistency in your professional output. It is no good to just deliver when it suits you.

Company Commanders and the men you command trusts Lieutenants who are consistent and reliable. It is often said that the most trusted Lieutenants are reliable and if they had a task delegated, it would happen on time and at the expected quality or above, every time. Whereas, an unreliable Lieutenant, generally, needs more direction, checking and realigning because his plans wouldn’t always work. So, again if we see, trust is built through both competence and its repeated demonstration.

### A True Incident

On a sunny hot day, while being deployed, somewhere near the Rajasthan Borders, all officers of our unit were sitting in a conference being taken by the Commanding Officer (CO). The runner came and informed the CO that there is an urgent call from the Divisional Headquarters. He went out and thus came, the much-needed break...

After some time, the runner came in and announced, "*Saab ji, all Battery Commander's have been called by the CO.*"

A few minutes later, a runner came in and said, "*Gagan Saab, CO Saab, jaldi bula rahe hain.*"

The moment I entered the CO's office, he got up from his chair and said, "*Congratulations Gagan, you have been selected for a special mission across the International Boundary and you must leave immediately for Divisional Headquarters.*"

(On a lighter side, I felt as if I have been selected for a United Nation mission.)

But it was a proud moment for me, as a young Lieutenant of one and a half years of service, that I could generate such confidence, that all the senior officers of my unit selected me, for such an important task.

- **Be Meticulous:** There is always a temptation to take shortcuts. The new Lieutenants must not succumb to the temptation, no matter how good they think they and their men are. Diligent Commanders, who do not cut corners and give tasks the attention they require, are more trusted and are rewarded with more freedom.

The temptation to cut corners is everywhere for the busy and assumingly overburdened young Lieutenant, especially if it seems that everyone else is doing it too. Yet Company Commanders are clear; they trust those who carry out tasks diligently and pay attention to details in both planning and execution. Untrustworthy young Commanders displays lack of attention to details, leading to a poor organisation or aren't rigorous and take shortcuts.

On the other hand, young Commanders are trusted if they give right level of rigour and attention to the tasks they have been assigned. An important part of that is, giving planning the respect it deserves, rather than winging it and relying on the self or the abilities of the men you command to get them through. Diligence and attention to detail are

about being conscientious. They are also to do with maturity and self-discipline, which brings me to the next important facet of building trust.

- **Discipline:** This is not (always) a game. Enjoy your job and do not take yourself too seriously. But equally, remember that good tactical leaders know when to show self-discipline and can think about the long-term consequences of their actions. Lieutenants who act without thinking through the consequences make the kind of mistakes that ultimately requires the Company Commander(s) to step in and solve.

The young leaders are trusted if they are more matured and self-controlled or are mature, self-disciplined and level-headed. They understand the consequences of their actions.

My first Commanding Officer always used to urge his officers to "think to the finish" when they were planning and acting. When you act without having thought to the finish or when you act impulsively, they create second- and third-order problems. Part of that is because of lack of experience.

- **Courage of Conviction:** Most Company Commander(s) appreciates junior officers who can openly and honestly communicate with them. Approach your Company Commander with information, back brief them and query the plan. Some even like to have their plans challenged – but check first and learn how to do it right.

The average Lieutenant might find this hard to believe, but one in five Company Commander(s) value those, who approach them to offer unsolicited information – either to back brief them on tasks, ask for more direction or appropriately challenge shortcomings in their plans or ideas. The secret, of course, is in doing it right.

Some Company Commander(s) value this behaviour because it helps to improve the quality of outputs. As one said, "They always came back and asked for clarification or read back when given a task. They also asked for my advice. It meant the task they perform would be in a better state." Back-briefs and questions also show that a Lieutenant understands what is being asked of him. One of



the officers explained that he trusts an officer who is “willing to reasonably challenge me. When he does it, it means, I know he understands my intent. It shows they have thought about adding value to the plan.” Thus, if you see, the courage of conviction holds an important facet of military leadership.

In an era where we increasingly expect subordinates to give a well-considered challenge, some Company Commander(s) are mature enough to accept, that their junior officers have something valuable to add.

I remember, when as a Commanding Officer, I graded one of my troop Commander as ‘Outstanding’ in his Annual Confidential Reports, he was literally stunned. He said, “Sir, I never expected that you will give such high grading since I always countered your thought process and even some of the orders.” To which, my reply was, “it was that courage of conviction, which I liked the most and thus this grading was not just for that but the hard work you have put in all throughout the year”.

So, as young, upright and diligent officers, do not hold back. Many Company Commander(s) value junior leaders who are willing to approach them, back brief them and challenge their ideas.

### **Last But not the Least: Reputation Matters<sup>4</sup>**

Let it be very clear that while this is the final point, it is one of the most important points. Reputation matters. A good proportion of those former Company Commander(s) mentioned how important a platoon commander’s reputation was. Reputation matters because knowing what others think of a new Lieutenant provides some additional, independent, assessment of his ability and trustworthiness.

I was warned by the Commanding Officer that they needed to be watched, due to lack of leadership and professional skill. They had done well on a professional course they had been on. Essentially, they had been externally validated and scored well in one of their key technical competencies. The Battery Havildar Major and Junior Commissioned Officer

told me they were not competent. So, reputation matters. This means that all those behaviours young Officer(s) needs to display in front of their Commander, they need to display in front of the rest of the battalion too. Their performance on the external course and in other organisations will be and will have a strong bearing on whether or not they are trusted. Equally, how well they are trusted by the rest of their Company – particularly their soldiers and JCOs/NCOs will be taken into account.

As Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, the epitome of the Indian Military leadership once said, “An Officer is always on parade and you always will be looked upon by the men you command.”<sup>5</sup>

### **In Summary: Why Lieutenants need Trust**

What does this all mean for a new Lieutenant? First, let me say these points come with a health warning. The intention is not to create a generation of ‘sycophantic junior leaders’ who bend over to please and be trusted by their Initiating Officer/Reviewing Officer. In fact, not every sub-unit Commander is a paragon of virtue, nor are they all equally trusted by their Commanding Officer(s). As it says, as long as young officers act honestly, with integrity and within the Army’s leadership code, these are ten very simple yet critical ways for them to build trust. To be trusted and to reap the freedoms and job satisfaction that this trust brings, they must help their Company Commander(s) and men they command to trust them with their lives. The positive reply to the earlier-mentioned key questions, in your conscience, is what you should be working for?

There are consistently important behaviours and characteristics that lead Company Commander(s) to trust their new Lieutenants. So be selfless. Put soldiers and the mission before yourself and put the mission before your friendships. Understand and act within your Commander’s intent. Admit to mistakes and be reliable when at an arm’s length – safeguard the unit’s reputation. Show emotional intelligence and build useful and meaningful professional relationships. Be

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consistently and reliably competent, in and out of the field. Pay attention to detail and be conscientious in your job. Do not be afraid to approach, back brief and challenge your Commander. Most importantly, act this way with everyone, because your reputation matters.

These simple rules do not, of course, guarantee that you will be trusted. However, they are the result of deep analysis of views of some successful and experienced former Company Commanders and the men you are ought to command. They offer the best route to trust that I can think of. In all, military leadership as a Lieutenant is one of the most enjoyable jobs in the defence forces. Part of that enjoyment is having the freedom to exploit opportunities and make the most of the responsibility of command. But this freedom only comes to those who are trusted.

That freedom and the trust that enables it is out there for the taking, but only if you know how to take it.

### Notes

1. Originated from old French and late Middle English words, Lieu and Tenant, available at [www.oxworddictionaries.com](http://www.oxworddictionaries.com), accessed on 16 January 2020.
2. Directive Control means when a person is made in-charge of a mission but the control rests with the boss.

3. Daniel Goleman, Leadership – The Power of Emotional Intelligence, available at <https://www.amazon.in>, accessed on 16 April 2020.
4. 'Ethics and Character in Military Leadership', available at <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>, accessed on 20 January 2020.
5. 'Leadership' lecture by Sam Manekshaw, available at <https://youtu.be/eSvLFPXjc8>, accessed on 19 January 2020.

### Books you may like

1. Harry Laver, The Art of Command: Military Leadership From George Washington to Colin Powell. This is a collection of nine essays analysing and assessing the leadership styles of American Generals.
2. Robert L Taylor and William E Rosenbach, Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence. The book is an old publication of 1996 but still holds an apt description for today's Army leadership challenges. It is three editions and gives an insight into significant changes in the armed forces and the new realities.
3. Shiv Aroor and Rahul Singh, India's Most Fearless: True Stories of Modern Military Heroes. It even includes the story of an Army Major who led the Surgical Strikes in 2016 and not to miss the story of a Navy Officer who sailed into a treacherous port to rescue hundreds from an exploding war. There are fourteen true stories of extraordinary courage.

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