

Maximum Disclosure

the complete
2017-2018
collection

MAXDISCLOSURE.COM

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Messaging



Have you heard the Good News?

Good news. We protect America. The Department of Defense. We defend America, its people and values.

Easy, right?

My friend is a senior partner at a financial firm. He makes lots of money. He has trouble explaining what he does.

We don't have that problem. We can and should relate everything we do back to protecting America.

You're a PAO ... what do you do? Protect America. Light-wheeled mechanic? Protecting America, one PMCS at a time. Boatswain's mate? What do you do? I have no idea, but I do know you protect America by doing it.

In terms of your organization, focus on the similarity, not the difference. Stop trying to explain the detailed nuance of what your organization does compared to another. All of our organizations protect America; each a complement to the other. Focus on the common mission.

Make it clear for our audiences.

- Dave B.

Forever Lines ... Forever and Ever, Amen.

Command messages ... eh. OK. We all learn that in DINFOS, right? Let's step it up a notch; enter the concept of Forever Lines.

You'll remember that one of your main jobs as a public affairs professional is to convey enough context and background for your audience to understand what you are spewing. One way to do that is through forever lines.

Before every campaign or operation we take a few steps to build forever lines:

- **Deep media pull.** Find out what the public is already reading, hearing and watching about the subject. Yes, you can do this on any topic ... local or international.
- **Whiteboard session.** We bring together a subject matter expert (often an intel guy), our team and a few wise guys (to shake things up). We get smart on whatever topic we are about to communicate.
- **Headline Production Party (HPP).** Part of the development of your forever lines is to envision what headlines you intend to result from this action, campaign or operation. Start with the end in mind and consider what the media will write.

These three steps should help you develop three or four Forever Lines. Lines that you connect to every single thing you say. Lines that build context into the action. Lines that tell your audience what they need to know ahead of the information you are going to give them.

These lines shant be used only in responding to media queries or in news releases. I personally use them in every conference call I have with higher and adjacent PA folks. I use them when I brief the boss. I use Forever Lines when I'm updating the J3 and prepping the IO. The point here is, if you use Forever Lines so will everyone else.

- Dave B.

My Kids Know What I Do

I'm flying to DC tonight. I have a bunch of meetings to attend with my commander, and some on my own. These are important meetings that take me away from home. What am I doing? Ask my kids. They're pretty sure I'm flying to DC in order to protect America.

I have to work late. Why? To protect America. I'm deploying ... to protect America.

I have to attend a school to be better at protecting America.

Too often we try to send a nuanced message to uninformed audiences. Every Department of *Defense* news release should be grounded in the *fact* that the featured action featured is in an effort to protect of America. I emphasize 'Defense' here because that's our job.

Check out the example, on the next page.

This is a nice story. It's humanizing. Americans love dogs and this Soldier has a nice smile with heartwarming quotes. My kid would love this story but would also be confused, "What is combat camera and why are they in a place called Kurdistan?"

Good question. If only the author mentioned the whole reason she is deployed and messing with these fleabags is in *defense* of this great nation. Our audience is not my kids. Considering current-day information overload and our chickenhawk nation, we have to communicate assuming our audience has the attention span and understanding of my kids.

We have to go back to the basics of what we do and communicate it clearly. Will our military always have the resources, authority and support to protect America? Only if we communicate our efforts toward protecting America.

An article about a Soldier adopting a feral dog is nice but it only takes away from audience understanding and confuses our taxpayers. My kids won't get it. An article about a Soldier deployed across the world to protect America and while doing that, makes friends with a flea-bitten pup lends some understanding. My kids will eat that with a spoon.

"Why are you writing this article Dad?"

"I'm trying to help communicators protect America."

- Dave B.

Face of Defense: Soldier Looks Toward Reunion With Canine Friend From Iraq

Army Reserve Sgt. Tracy McKithern loves dogs.

Last year, when McKithern found a little female white stray dog sniffing around camp here during her yearlong deployment to Iraq -only one thing was going to happen.

"I fell in love with her immediately," she said.

McKithern, a combat photographer from Tampa, Florida, with the 982nd Combat Camera Company, was stationed at the Kurdistan Training Coordination Center, a multinational military organization responsible for the training of peshmerga and Iraqi forces in and around Irbil, from April 2017 to January 2018.

The little dog and her mother had been wandering around the base for weeks, McKithern found out. Stray dogs are common in Iraq, and the culture is not kind to them. Erby and her mom were kicked and hit with rocks daily and starving. Her brother and sister had disappeared before McKithern arrived.

Despite her rough experiences with humans to that point, Erby ran right up to McKithern the first time she held out her hand to the shaky little pup covered in scratches and dirt.

"She loved everyone," McKithern said of Erby. "She is the sweetest little soul. She came up to me immediately -probably hungry, but gentle. I think she was looking for love more than anything else."

McKithern, together with Italian and German soldiers her unit was partnered with, started caring for the little dog. They named her Erby Kasima, after nearby Irbil, the largest city in northern Iraq, and "Kasima" being the Arabic name for beauty and elegance.

The coalition soldiers would go on convoys into the surrounding countryside to train Iraqi army units six days a week, with McKithern documenting the missions. Every time they returned to the base, Erby was waiting.

"She ran up to our convoy every day," McKithern recalled. "She was so tiny she would fall and trip all over herself to get to us."

It didn't take long for Erby and her mom to realize that, not only were they safe around McKithern and her Italian and German friends, but these humans would feed them, too. As the weeks went by, the dogs' wounds began to heal and they started putting on weight.

Eventually, the growing pup took to sleeping on the step outside McKithern's quarters.

As the end of her deployment approached, McKithern started to wonder how she could ever leave Erby behind when she went back to the states and lamented about it on her Facebook page.

"One night I posted a pic of us on Facebook, with a caption that read something like, 'I wish I could take her home.'" McKithern recalled. "I went to sleep, woke up and my friends and family had posted links to various rescue groups. I reached out to one of them, the nonprofit Puppy Rescue Mission, and they responded immediately. We sent them \$1,000 and they set up a crowd fund to get the rest. We needed an additional \$3,500."

The immediate outpouring of generosity was astounding, McKithern said.

"We raised the rest of the money very quickly, and most of it was from complete strangers!" she said.

McKithern had many preparations to make before she left Iraq so Erby could eventually follow her. Vaccinations, documentation, travel arrangements -all had to be done somehow, in a war zone, while she fulfilled her military duties. It seemed like an overwhelming task in an already overwhelming situation. Even though she now had the funding, McKithern began to lose hope that she'd have the time and energy to complete needed details so Erby could join her in the states.

That's when several Kurdish and German officers that McKithern knew stepped in to help. They offered to complete anything she couldn't get done and get Erby onto the plane. With their help, McKithern returned home and Erby was set to follow her several weeks later.

McKithern had only been home in Florida for about a month when she received orders for a 67-day mission to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. She was to depart March 11, the very day Erby was scheduled to arrive at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City.

"I couldn't believe it!" McKithern said. "But I'm a soldier first, and my commander received an email looking for volunteers." McKithern said the gunnery exercise at Fort McCoy was an important mission and so she deployed to Wisconsin.

However, McKithern's husband, Army Sgt. Wes McKithern, who's also a combat cameraman for the 982nd, met Erby at the airport in New York and drove her home to Tampa, where she's waiting patiently to be reunited with her rescuer.

In a few short weeks, McKithern will fly home from Fort McCoy to be with Erby at last. It will be the end of a 16-month journey that's taken her across the world to find a little dog in a war zone -and with the help of generous strangers, a nonprofit dog rescue, and soldiers from three different armies -bring her all the way back to become part of a family.

"I can't believe it," McKithern said. "It feels like a miracle is happening."



Let's Talk About Something Important

We all remember that famous scene in *Glengarry Glen Ross* when Alec Baldwin says, "Put that coffee down. Coffee is for closers." Baldwin introduces his talk to the subordinate salesman by saying, "Let's talk about something important." (The clip has some offensive parts so view at your own risk.)

Listen. Listen to what you, your organization and boss talk about. Time and attention span are limited resources.

Let's talk about something important.

Catch your boss talking about something that doesn't drive understanding and action across the force and tell him, "Let's talk about something important."

People within and outside your organization will sometimes lack focus. They'll be looking at shiny, irrelevant things; or problems you cannot influence or solve; or be fixated on numbers or facts which really don't matter.

They have forgotten about "why." They forgot about the purpose of the organization and the purpose of communication. We should only communicate to drive understanding and action toward your organizational purpose.

Let's talk about something important. What supports your priorities is important.

What you can do something about is important. What tells your story is important.

The rest is noise and trivia. Trivia means trivial.

Don't focus on the trivial. You're better than that. Talk about something important, your nation needs you to.

Now go and do likewise.

- Dave B.

Baking a Ham ... or Whatever

People used to use recipe books. They had a list of ingredients and short instructions describing how and when to add each of the ingredients ... boom, you had your dish. The problem is you never really knew where you were going until you got there.

Now we watch YouTube videos. The good videos start with the finished product. You start by seeing the end, you get to see that hunk of meat come out of the oven and get cut. The directions **START** at the **END**.

Before you figure out your forever lines, before you draft the release or decide how your going to release the info, **START** with what you want to achieve. **START** with the headlines. What do you desire to see in the newspaper the next day. Once you figure that out, the rest will fall in place.

ProTip: In our office we have a Headline Production Party. To start off our PA planning for a pending operation or event, we get together in front of a whiteboard and start shouting out the headlines we want to read the next day. We start at the end.

- Dave B.

Different, Better, Special

I find that most journalists are happy to cover something if you can help them explain why the current situation is different, better or special.

In a former public affairs job, we had the mandate to inform the public via a press release every few months of the same thing ... for eternity. Dave C decided to make it different, better and special just by taking a creative look at it. He used the fact we were on our two hundred and fifty-something iteration to highlight the training event's endurance and proven effectiveness. "U.S. Forces Liberate Pineland for the 254th time," the headlines read. It gave us a venue to talk about what was important and why we must maintain the resources, operational support, approvals and authorities to do it.

This applies to much of the stuff military public affairs does. Training, graduations, Soldier/Airman/Sailor of the Year, even strikes against the enemies of our nation. How is what you're covering different, better or special?

Too often we see factory, cut-and-paste releases which deserve more.

"I don't know why the media doesn't cover this," say the writers of these releases. If only.

But watch out, cause your thing could be different in a way that's worse.

The media will cover that too.

And look, if what you are trying to cover isn't different, better or special, don't waste your time. Don't cover it.

- Dave B.

Purpose, Directed or IDFK

Because you're a MaxDis reader, you already have established a purpose for your organization. It probably has something to do with communicating in order to ensure your organization has the ability to accomplish its mission.

Every once in a while, maybe annually, you need to ensure what you DO is aligned with your purpose. Here's an easy way:

- **Revisit Your Purpose.** Talk over your purpose with the entire team. Is it still right? Is this purpose meeting the needs of the organization? Check it.
- **What We Do Discussion.** Pull out the old white board with the team and list out every single thing you do. List out everything that takes any amount of time. You might be surprised at some of the shit you've acquired to do over the past year. Time is our only limited resource, figure out how your team is spending it.
- **Give it the Test.** Now your team should quickly examine each one of the things your team does. There are only three ways to categorize each task. Category 1 are things which contribute to your purpose. Category 2 are things which have been directed. Use Category 3 for the tasks you have no idea why you do.
- **Lead Category 1 (Purpose).** Take a look at these tasks and be sure they are still smart. If they are help your team create systems and processes to do them efficiently. Enable your team to slay these tasks like a ISIS courier.
- **Lead Category 2 (Directed).** Public affairs shops are directed to do a lot. You have three choices STFU and do the task, tell the person who directed you you're no longer going to do it, or just don't do it. This takes some guts and organizational wasta.
- **Lead Category 3 (IDFK).** If your team is doing something and no one knows why you do it: stop doing and pay attention to see if anything happens. I bet nothing will happen. You've just relieved yourself of that time consuming item.

That's it friends, you've just enabled your team to be better. If you did this right, what you DO is no aligned with WHY you exist. This little exercise frees up time and when you free up time, you can do more category 1 things.

Now go and do likewise.

- Dave B.

Fix Reality First

I hear from our ID Card Facility two or three times a week. Unfortunately, it's only from the consistent e-mail alerts that they are going to be closed during times they're supposed to be open.

I would actually trust them more if I heard from them less.

When the only thing you hear about an organization is disappointing news or sub-par performance, people will lose trust in and respect for that organization.

Clear, honest communication can help provide background and reinforce your values, but the solution to the problem isn't communication; it's action. As an audience member, I don't need the ID Card Facility to start communicating more, or highlighting all the times they are open because they want to balance out their multiple "we're closed" notifications. That's just more noise.

I need the ID Card Facility to stop closing.

As communication advisers, we are in a position to show leaders what our audiences are hearing, and how we lose credibility when they only hear things contrary to the organization's purpose. As communication advisers, we can tell commanders which actions must happen so we can communicate differently.

When the ID Card Facility is closed. When we harm or lose trust with the local population. When service members or families are unhappy. When targets are missed or territory lost. When we crash vehicles, lose equipment, break airplanes or run ships aground. When the DFAC is out of eggs. When you're tired.

You can't communicate your way out of reality. Fix reality.

If you want people to trust and rely on the ID Card Facility, make sure those people aren't constantly hearing that the ID Card Facility is closed ... by keeping the ID Card Facility open.

If you can't do that, accept your lost credibility and do what you can.

- Dave C.



Make it F'in Personal

- “This is personally very important to me...”
- “Let me tell you about my personal experience...” “I care about this...”
- “My experience tells me...”
- “You have my personal guarantee...”

Talking points, command messages and forever lines are essential but they only stick when you make it personal.

Our team was recently coaching one of our bosses on a major public engagement. This guy is amazingly experienced. Most of your bosses are. Your commanders are commanders because they enjoy a vast amount of experience and they care deeply about what they do.

Get the forever lines straight and embed those into every answer but be sure to make it personal.

Look your audiences in the eye, tell personal stories, build personal connections and communicate the way human beings were meant to.

- Dave B.

Safety is Our Number One Priority, and Other Falsehoods

“Safety is our number one priority.”

No it's not.

Preparing the team for combat is. Years ago, a contractor was killed at a range where my organization was training. We were being safe but I found it hard to say safety was our number one priority when we were training in the extreme heat of the North Carolina summer, in full kit with live ammo. If my command was prioritizing safety over all else, we would be chilling at home. Instead, how about, “We train for combat to keep America safe, this was a horrific accident. Eddie was a great team member.”

When I was a young company commander about to go to combat, a fellow company commander walked around telling people (including families), “my goal is to bring everyone home.”

Is it? There are easier ways to ensure everyone comes home than to deploy to Iraq's “triangle of death.”

“People are our greatest asset.”

Your greatest asset? Good, but if we say it we have to add context and show it's true.

“We'll do a complete investigation.”

Not so fast, make sure we are going to do a complete investigation (whatever that means) before we declare it publicly.

“We take these allegations seriously.”

Truth is, we take some allegations seriously. Maybe not these. If you're going to say we take these seriously, then be sure you do.

As public affairs officers we have to be careful, organizations often slip into dissimulated catch phrases which are easily proven wrong publicly. Good reporters will recognize garbage statements like these, and ask for supporting evidence.

When your organization is in crisis, communicate from a completely factual position and avoid catchphrases wrought with assumed meaning and dichotomy. On background, help the media understand what's going on and craft forever lines which link back to your core mission. Hint, if you are in the military your core mission has something to do with the defense of our nation.

- Dave B.

Thoughts and Prayers

“We offer our thoughts and prayers.”

“Our thoughts and prayers are with her and her family.”

“They have our thoughts and prayers during this difficult time.”

“Our thoughts and prayers are with them.”

Better yet,

“Our thoughts and prayers GO OUT to them.”

Boom. Now we are actively slinging thoughts and prayers around.

Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts. Prayers. Prayers and Thoughts. It’s become a joke. There are memes about it.

Can’t we do better? Yes we can.

Call to action: Don’t ever publicly offer your thoughts and prayers and don’t allow your leaders to. Be personal. Be creative. Be sincere.

What the fuck does offering your thoughts and prayers mean anyway?

If you are trying to publicly offer something personal on behalf of your organization then be personal. Be sincere. Say something that means something to the people that need to hear your words. Say something that is pertinent to the situation and the people. Offer solace. It’s actually the very least you can do.

The most lazy and insulting thing you can do in a difficult situation is submit a cookie-cutter, factory response.

There’s plenty of critique surrounding using the phrase instead of actually taking action. I’m not even suggesting you must substitute for action. I’m just saying, as a communicator, stop using the tired, meaningless, now comical phrase.

- Dave B.



Is It About You?

“I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for taking no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting.”

- Snoop Dogg

My church stocks the pews with little “I Gave Online” cards for people to drop in the offering buckets.

Give me a break. What are you looking for, credit? Validation? Don’t broadcast your contribution; get back to work.

We’ve said it before: it’s not about you. It is, however, about effects over efforts. Which offering buckets are you (unwisely) seeking out in your organization?

- That slide you added to the briefing just so everyone will know you were there.
- That special logo you made for your own Public Affairs team, rather than repping the greater organization.
- That briefing you added to the training schedule to pad your own evaluation.
- That fit you pitched about needing more people or resources?

Which offering buckets are you (unwisely) dropping your organization into?

- That article you wrote without finding a news hook. (Example: “Commander visits X” or any vanilla award/promotion “article” that doesn’t tell a story)
- The press release about something the press will ignore.
- Countless tweets and posts, flooding the web with noise but no signal.
- Community relations events more focused on the photos you’ll take and plaster all over the Internet, rather than genuine engagement with the human beings in front of your face.
- Trying so hard to get photos with your unit patch onto sites so your senior leaders will see them. In my day, this was the AKO front page, and various command pages we knew were the programmed home page on our unclassified networks.

There’s something to this: people love to talk about themselves; and people also love to consume media about themselves. As a communicator, this gives you a leg up. If you want to reach an audience, and give them something to remember and share, then give them an opportunity to read and talk about themselves.

It’s not about you. It never will be. We have so much more at stake; we protect America. Connect to your audience and the higher mission. Focus on effects, not efforts.

It’s not about you. You’re not important. Talk about something important.

- Dave C.

Shift and Go

Did everyone’s high school cross country coach only communicate through loud catchphrases, or just mine?

Hill practices were the most devastating. Drenched in sweat and caked in dust from our town’s dirt roads, we’d end up on half-mile-long inclines with nowhere to hide. And we couldn’t just turn around at the top of the hill and catch our breath jogging down ... one by one, we’d hit the top of the hill, “shift” into a traditional sprint and “go” for another minute or so along a plateau. The exercise here was to tap into the different muscles that either powered us up the hill, and those for driving along a straightaway.

“Shift and go” became a common mantra, to the point of absurdity so of course it’s on my mind nearly 20 years later. What else is on my mind? Communication. Let’s bring it all together.

Learning to be PAOs at DINFOS, our teachers taught us the value of “bridging” into a command messages after answering a reporter’s question. We were even given a list of 33 “bridging statements” excerpted from V.T. Covello’s *Keeping Your Head in a Crisis: Responding to Communication Challenges Posed by Bio-terrorism and Emerging Diseases* (yikes). Actual samples from the list include:

- “And what’s most important to know is...”
- “However, what is more important to look at is...”
- “And the one thing that is important to remember is...”
- “While ... is important, it is also important to remember...”

Is this the best we can do? When you’re in the throgs of an engagement, answering hard questions, you can’t taper off just when you reach the top of the hill. Your organization’s message, why, and passion deserves much more than a clunky whimper about empty values and priorities.

Answer questions as best you can, and then shift into what you’re truly excited to talk about: protecting America and the role your organization plays toward that purpose. Don’t look for a bridge to take you into your command message; find a slingshot.

Get excited. Get mad. Own it. Shift and go.

- Dave C.

Clear Communication



The 10 Commandments of Communication

This is why I am writing to you: Your job is to communicate and enable others to communicate. Follow these rules to ensure your audience is going to receive what you send.

1. It's about your audience.

Think about what they will hear, retain, understand and do. Remember the target discussion? Your audience likely remember three key points, help them! Emphasize the important points. Speak their language in memorable ways and listen to their concerns.

2. Start with why.

Your audience will know what to listen for if you ensure they understand the problem needing to be solved. In their faces, present plainly, "This is why I am talking to you."

3. Provide just enough background and context.

Just enough, but enough. When a joke is funny, it's because the listener understands the premise. Set up your punchlines by explaining the premise with the essential details – but only the required ones. Extraneous details distract from the premise and lose the listener. There's a balance here, find it!

4. Be efficient.

Our only limited resource is time. When you have communicated enough

information to enable understanding and action, you're done. Your audience will appreciate shorter discussions, e-mails and posts. It might make you feel good to justify your existence but your audience cares about effects, not efforts. Basically what we're saying is, when you've made your point, stop talking. Just. Stop. Talking.

5. Tell relatable stories.

Once upon a time, and ever since, humans have communicated through stories. They work. They follow a formula – hero, jeopardy, resolution – and have the context necessary for understanding and retention. Your audience doesn't remember yesterday's shopping list. They all remember nursery rhymes from childhood. Can you imagine reading a list of commandments without a story to couple them all together? Oh.

6. Be there, face-to-face if possible.

You're an animal. So am I. The human animal picks up understanding through more than words – we message with our bodies and our souls. Make that connection and match your actions to your words. A discussion in person allows everyone to listen and learn; confirm shared understanding; and agree on the best way ahead. Look them in their eyes and smell their understanding.

7. Speak broadly to enable the community of action.

Fast and flat means asking who else needs to know and including them in the discussion. Different perspectives and insights produce breakthrough ideas. Increase opportunities for innovation and effectiveness by communicating widely. The more people you communicate to, the more people can spread your message.

8. Communicate consistently.

What you do is at least as important a message as what you say. Be deliberate in your messaging in every way you communicate. You have to use the same language among your staff that you use publicly. Your organization can't afford to do one thing, while you say another. Don't be this guy.

9. Confirm understanding.

Repetition and dialogue ensure understanding and enable learning. Identify and emphasize common themes so your audience can follow the ongoing story. If you're not sure if your audience understands, ask them.

Do you understand?

There are 9 commandments here, see rule 4.

- Dave B.

Three Things

A professional communicator's job is to provide accurate information with speed and context. Accurate, speed (timely) and context that's three.

Speed

There's no need to explain how quickly information travels. If you were born after 1965 and have seen a smart phone you get that.

Accuracy

It comes down to this; either you are providing accurate information fast or someone else does. Check and double check information when you send it and be sure it's understandable; make it googleable.

Context

When someone else writes, it's their context, their facts, their interpretation. The public deserves your context, facts and interpretation because we are the good guys. The 5 Ws includes 'why.' Why is the context. Don't give the public 3 or 4 Ws; it's incomplete and someone else is going to fill in the blanks.

Fail: I've been too slow. I've been wrong. I've left out the context. It happens. We can't weigh one (accuracy) against another (speed); it's a three legged stool. If we are too slow but accurate no one sees your shit. If you are super fast but wrong, you may lose some credibility. I can't think of a reason anyone would ever leave out the context ... but we do, too often.

The information bus is moving fast. Will you get hit by it, be on it, be driving it or are you passively waiting for it to arrive? I'm driving.

- Dave B.

It's About Understanding

"I'm just trying to understand ..."

With these five words, reporters will crush through the Q&As you spent hours meticulously crafting in order to make the perfect series of non-answers. On paper, your non-answers may look great, despite their lack of substance or information. In practice, you've provided no substance, background, context or understanding.

And that's our job! To promote understanding! Understanding gets our organizations resources, authorities, approvals and support. Understanding makes our members and families feel proud, and connected to the mission. Understanding builds momentum in the good times, and keeps us afloat in crises. Non-answers do not promote understanding, and reporters know better than to accept them. The good reporters aren't calling you to collect and accept any answer to their questions; they're calling with questions because there's something they need to understand ... and then they build that understanding into reports to wide audiences. They're putting together a puzzle, not just gathering disparate pieces.

Way Ahead: Make it real. Write Public Affairs plans and take actions that support understanding. Put the time and research into crafting Q&As to answer questions and offer context; not creative ways to not answer the question. Think like a reporter: if you had to write the story, what would you need to understand and what sound bites would lend to that understanding? Provide background and context, even off the record, for reporters who need it. What conclusions are you making because of your understanding that the reporter doesn't have? Give them this understanding so they can make the same conclusions.

This is a long game. You will work with these journalists again. When you do, you'll want to start from the last point of cooperative understanding.

- Dave C.



L'esprit de L'escalier

"Fuck, I should've said that."

After I talk to the media, or anyone, when the stakes are high there is always something better I should have or could have said. It's similar to when 1LT A. Lady has to edit a tweet. This phenomenon is called staircase wit or l'esprit de l'escalier, if you're nasty.

Even as prepared I am with my bucket of responses, in retrospect, there was always something better.

I work around really smart people, my partners often tell me what they would have said and it's usually better.

The line in the newspaper only looks better than it sounded in the post newspaper, it usually looks worse than it sounded in the New York Times.

I love me some l'esprit de l'escalier. I write down what I should have said and try to say it better next time. When people see my work and tell me what they would have said, I often tell them what I should have said, which is better than what they would have said. It's a fun exchange.

You know how O stands for Operations? Well, P stands for Public. In our jobs the stakes are high. Everyone gets to see and comment on our work. There's nothing you can do about it so love it.

I could have written this better.

- Dave B.

Context is Worth a Thousand Words

We're buying a house. The good news is that most houses are listed online. Multiple photos of the house and great descriptions can be found on the realty website and Google will help you scope out the area with Google Maps and Street View. All of these items provide context to our starting point: the street number address and price.

We gather greater context when we visit the place. The adjacent house is two feet from this house. The yard is beautiful. The neighborhood has a great "feel." All of this is context that helps us make a decision. Making decisions on the street number address and price alone is uninformed and out of context.

Your job as a PAO is to give your audiences as much context as you can. We talked about bias, remove bias, inaccuracy and misinformation by adding context. A few examples of how you can help give context:

- **Hold the press briefing as close to the crisis site or action as possible.** Holding a press briefing at your headquarters is only convenient for you and your boss. Physically being at or near the action gives context that your audiences won't get anywhere else.
- **Get out of the conference room.** Our audiences often travel to see us, sometimes they fly around the world to meet us in person. When they arrive, we could shuttle them into a conference room and show them a map of what they would be seeing. Instead, give them real context, shove the map in their hands and get them out to see what you do in real life. Sometimes it's uncomfortable and dirty; this is context too.
- **When you talk publicly about operations and successes, provide context.** Get the J2 to give an unclassified background on the threat. Tell your audiences what these operations mean in the context of greater global security. Teach people how this singular operation fits into context of everything you do.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Whose words? When you provide context you provide some of the thousand. Without context, your audiences fill in the blanks, potentially with uninformed bias or misinformation.

Your audiences aren't looking to buy a house from you, but you do need them to buy your story. It's easy to stop with the street address and the price by giving bare bones statements and media query non-answers: that's minimum disclosure. Use all the tools in your toolkit to add truthful context and sell your house.

- Dave B.



Always Be Messaging

Our senior leaders held a town hall session with several staff sections, including ours (we actually go to all the town hall sessions, regardless of audience).

The other attendees probably thought the commander planted questions with our team in the audience. We set up opportunities for our senior leaders to reinforce their priorities and values ... which are incidentally our own priorities and values.

Here's the thing: Our prompts and the follow-on discussions were not planted or even coordinated ahead of time. They were simply on-message, because everything we do is on-message.

It has to be.

You're the organization's chief communicator. You'd better always be messaging, too.

Your bucket of responses is your lifeline ... fill it up with on-message topics, goals and concerns. Every now and then, dump it out and take stock of its contents' messaging value: are they still relevant? Stale? Is it time for an update?

Here's how our team makes sure one another is always messaging:

- We don't just talk about "what's in the news" like it's yesterday's gossip: we add value by discussing the headlines' implications for our organization; what our team or senior PAOs are doing in response to the latest news; why it's important to pay attention to the international media environment; or we redirect to the news items our members ought to be paying attention to.
- When we walk by or sit next to a fellow American, we don't say we're doing "oh, fine" or anything else. We get fired up, genuinely talk-

ing up the great things we get to be part of, the quality people we're surrounded by, the upcoming engagement we're looking forward to, or the hard problem we're trying to solve. Everybody gets tired, but nobody wants to hear about it; we can sleep when we're dead.

- We welcome all of our office visitors whether they stop by through chance or arrangement with a smile and a cup of coffee, because we want people to share opportunities and accept our assistance.
- We're deep into our organization's aspirational culture--we know how we, and our senior leaders--want our organization's members to be seen and understood. We pay attention for positive examples of team members' focus and actions, and find opportunities to make those vignettes public.

As you can see, when I say "messaging," I'm not talking about false motivation or empty talking points. Real messages have substance and add value.

The purpose of each engagement is to drive action. Make sure you're driving the right actions for your organization.

Talk about something important.

- Dave C.

Correct. Clear. Clean.

I had an intern who spent too much time fine-tuning her articles. She invested a lot of personal emotion into her work, and was nervous about my edits. Even when not working on deadline, I got her to realize that edits and improvements will only come after a first draft is submitted. "Accurate and Done" became our mantra.

I still believe in Accurate and Done for folks who struggle with deadlines, but over the years I've expanded on the original vision:

Correct.

Is the information accurate? Is it consistent with, or does it clarify, your command's actions? Did you include proper context about the situation? Does it represent your command's position on the issue? Does it incorporate your forever lines?

Clear.

Did you start with why? Are you specific enough? Did you put it in plain English? Did you look at it from your audience's perspectives, and build in the appropriate background? Is it TLDR? Did you consider adding an infographic, map or website that will enhance the message? Will the audience be driven to action?

Clean.

Does it accurately represent our organization's attention to detail? Does the branding, organization, or presentation reflect your command's pride in itself? Did you use two words where one would do? Is this going to the audience in a way and at a time where they will see and understand it?

You'll find a way to apply these to everything you're working on. Articles. Meetings. PAG. Videos. Tweets. Interviews. Posters. Classes. T-shirts. Events. Statues.

If you don't have time to make it clean, at least make it clear. If you don't have time to make it clear, at least make it correct.

The best communicators do all three.

- Dave C.

Telegraph Your Punches

Novels and movies love the build-up and payoff, right?

It's fun, and entertaining, to spend hours gathering all the pieces and then finally, surprisingly, find out how they fit together.

In real life, on the other hand, our listeners should never wonder where a conversation is leading. Unlike boxing, you want reporters, senior leaders, fellow spokespersons, and soldiers to know exactly where every punch is going to land.

When you are communicating ... and engaging ... you are doing so to achieve an effect.

Action or understanding is the name of the game. In other words, you want your audience to do something, or know something (and ultimately do something because of what they know).

When your listeners know where your punches are going to land, they'll grasp and retain the basic concepts throughout the conversation. They'll ask better follow-up questions. They'll share your stories and forever lines with others. They'll have no questions about where you stand. Most importantly, they will be your partner in generating understanding and enabling action.

Of course we should try to surprise and delight our colleagues and public, but never at the cost of coherence.

- Dave C.

Blaming the Target

My wife and I went shooting the other day. The target just wouldn't take the rounds. We were shooting great but the stupid just wouldn't take the rounds as we intended. We kept shooting and the target was just too (insert adjective) to 'get' the rounds.

Sounds foolish right?

When you're shooting it's responsibility to put the rounds on the target. When you're communicating it's your responsibility to ensure the audience understands the message.

Sometimes your audience will never get it. Stop shooting, you're wasting your ammo.

Most of the time, it's up to you. Change your approach, method, technique, medium, venue, outlet, tone-of-voice, mannerisms, environment, whatever.

Change whatever you need to change so that the audience gets the message and you start hitting the target.

- Dave B.



Write it So Your Mom Understands

When I deployed to Afghanistan in 2016, my friends and family were surprised. My little brother (bad ass Marine) went twice – 2010 and 2012, but 2016? Wasn't that war over? No, it's not. There are still bad guys out there, and U.S. forces and our partners are going after them, putting their lives on the line. But why should America care when this war is old enough to drive? You're the PAO. Your job is to explain this. And you need to know ops to do it.

- I made it my goal to make people care, and in order to do that, I had to explain to my mom, friends and family why I was there. I had to explain it in terms someone who is not in the military, like my mom who saw her kids go to war, would understand.
- When I wrote press releases, I started with the "Why." Why did we do what we did? Why are we training forces? Why are we sending Americans to a war zone?
- It's easy to pull operational reporting; copy and paste. Isn't plagiarism the highest form of flattery? Shit, we write from the 5Ws. We learned it in DINFOS, but if the J3 staff knew how to write for the greater audience, we would understand their emails, CONOPs, OPOORDS, FRAGOs and storyboards after the first read. If they write the 5Ws, why are you there? Why?
- Make yourself relevant. Be the communicator, the bridge between operations and daily life, and tell your mom, in words she understands, why you were sent to protect America.

- Carly C.



On Your Left

Sometimes, people passing me during a run will call out a polite, “On your left,” before they go by.

Smart word choice, right? Just enough words to help me understand what’s about to happen next, phrased to eliminate confusion.

Imagine the chaos if the speaker said the opposite, “On *my* right,” in this situation.

Mid-run, I don’t think I’d have any way to decipher that message. “On whose right? Who’s this guy talking to? Where is he?” I’d have to slow down, glance over both shoulders, probably ask some kind of question to achieve clarity, take an earbud out to hear the response, fumble with my shit and lose focus.

The audience doesn’t care who the speaker is and what’s on that person’s right and where they’re going. It would be a statement entirely unfocused on the audience, their perspective, and what they need. No runner in their right mind would say, “On my right,” to a runner they’re about to pass.

But Public Affairs Officers do it all the time, don’t we?

Statements, interviews, query responses, tweets ... it’s easy to build them solely from our organization’s perspective and need. We write these things to be about us: what we know and what we would like someone else to know (and do).

When we do this, our audience fumbles with their shit and loses focus.

Let’s shift our perspective. Next time, tell your audience what’s coming up on their left ... not our right.

- Dave C.

Make it a Package

It’s your job to communicate about your organization. It’s your job to enable other to communicate about your organization.

Your organization does a handful of things. Maybe it’s your METL. Maybe it’s your boss’s priorities. There are a handful of a key topics you should be communicating. Identify things these things, categorize and keep a list. These things should end up on your task tracker.

Instead of a press release, tweet, single media engagement or PAG; communicate using a package. Each of the steps below build on the next, making you, your team and your package better.

Here’s how to prepare your organization to communicate:

1. Get the facts, always start with the unvarnished truth classified or not, start with the facts. #Getsmart we bring in subject matter experts, members of our organization who know the most about the topic to talk with us. Listen to how your commander talks about it.
2. Write a white paper. Usually this becomes a narrative about the issue; sometimes it’s a fact sheet. Writing the information out helps you form your thoughts. This white paper must include the Forever Lines. This white paper may turn into PAG if you’re planning to talk with the media. Maybe you write a feature story here.
3. Build visuals. These are graphics which support the white paper. It doesn’t have to be powerpoint. A photo, info-graph, map build something visual which supports what you are trying to say.
4. At this point, you and your team should already be talking about it.
5. But check your Must Haves first.
6. Start working toward a video. You’re going to need to identify opportunities for b-roll. You’re going to have to interview people. You will likely need video graphics.
7. Share your communication package widely and without prejudice. Enable, enable, enable.
8. Check to see if people understand and look for opportunities to double down.

Think about it, at the end of these 7 steps you will have a paper, graphic, PAG and a video to help you drive the information (and message) home.

Don’t you want to get home?

- Dave B.



Googleability

Quick protip in the spirit of @USAWTFM_PAO who says a lot of what we write on MaxDis is common sense:

Since we're in the military and often deployed, we have to talk about places, things or people that are hard to reference by our audiences. As public affairs people, we try to translate what's said around the JOC to the public.

For example, the place that everyone in the JOC knows as Whoville, may not be Whoville to the general public. We might call it Whoville because of the local reference or because that's what the our mapping software says it is. We're working from a 10 digit grid, the public is not. The place might have a more or less official name which is better known to the broad, general public.

To avoid misunderstanding and wasted time with follow up questions for clarity, make sure what, where and who you write about is googleable.

When a journalist receives your information they will google it in order to learn more. Be one step ahead and make sure what you write is googleable and ensure the terms you are using gets journalists to desired google results.

- Dave B.

The Problem of Humility

It is good to be humble. It is good for your audiences to know when your organization is right and good.

When your organization isn't as perfect as the public expects it to be, or when an individual fails to meet your organization's expectation, remind your public how great, precise, measured, true, thoughtful, righteous, humane, intelligent, skilled, competent, trustworthy, valorous, heroic and humble your organization is.

The way we (the Department of Defense) communicate the horribly unfortunate circumstance of civilian casualties is an example. Despite being the most precise military in the history of the world, U.S. airstrikes sometimes kill civilians. Anytime U.S. strikes kill civilians, the U.S. acknowledges it publicly. The right way to acknowledge this is in the context of the immense precision and care that goes into each and every strike.

The wrong way is to forget the context and only talk about our mistakes.

Secretary Mattis does humility well (in context). When taking questions about Yemen, Secretary Mattis referred to what he called, "a much larger issue," which is "people are being held to a standard today that warfare can seldom permit achieving. "We are being held to a standard – 'we' being us and anyone associated with us – that has never been achieved before in warfare," he said.

This isn't spinning. This is telling the truth. The whole truth has context to create understanding.

Sexual assault is another tough issue that the military communicates about. Despite being the most disciplined and intelligent military in the history of the world, some members of our organization choose to commit sexual assault. Our defense leaders emphasize the existing military culture and the fact that sexual assault doesn't fit into that. Read this as, "Sexual assault and DoD are discordant. They simply don't fit together." The right way to acknowledge the problem is in the context of the strong and admirable culture of the military.

The wrong way is to forget the context and only talk about our mistakes. Elizabeth Van Winkle, acting Assistant SecDef for Readiness, does humility well (in context). "It's problematic behaviors [sexual assault] that are unacceptable in the military community and certainly against our values."

This isn't spinning. This is telling the truth. The whole truth has context to create understanding.

Humility is great until your audiences forgets how great you are. Don't screw with me on this.

Don't forget to say you're sorry.

- Dave B.

Answer with Authority

Listen to your commander talk to their boss.

Do they speak in generalities? Make guesses? Struggle to find words, or constantly contradict themselves?

Of course not. Your commander speaks with authority. He or she knows what they need to achieve, and have mastered the information they must convey in order to do so. They know what their commander is likely going to want to know, and also know better than to waste time or credibility with guesses or inaccuracies. For the information they don't know, your commander doesn't take uninformed shots in the dark: they either promise to follow-up, or pull in a staff member with the answer (the S2 for intel specifics, the S4 on the logistics flow, the PAO for the messaging plan).

Just like our commanders, we can and should speak with authority. We're in the business of facts, truth and confidence. This applies when you're talking to a reporter on the record or on background; briefing your commander on what's in the media; or updating senior PAOs on an emerging situation. These engagements (and others) require your focus and authority.

- Speak with authority. Say the things you know to be true. Say them once, and clearly.
- Don't drop down into additional details or stories just because you have more information rattling around in your head. Stay hyper-focused on what the listener needs to hear, then get off the X. As Elmore Leonard said, leave out the parts that people tend to skip.
- Speak in headlines: combine fact and assessment for maximum effect. "One of our convoys was struck by an IED; the fourth this month along this route. All forces and equipment are returned to base." ... or ... "The plane with our equipment is delayed due to weather; if it's delayed another 24 hours we'll publish an updated training calendar."
- Only promise timelines you can control.
- Share the information you have verified and can cite.
- It's not about knowing all of the information out there; it's about knowing where to find information you don't have. Systems and relationships help, here.
- When you're in brainstorming or question mode, advertise it clearly. If the setting is appropriate for open discussion, be candid about your lack of familiarity with the topic. More importantly, flag and define your known unknowns, and the effects you plan to achieve when those known unknowns become known knowns.

Communicate with authority, in order to communicate for action.

- Dave C.

Own It

A friend of mine started a blog a few years ago (not this blog). He had useful insights to share, but included some kind of caveat in most of his posts.

"I'm no expert, but..."

"Then again, what do I know?" "Of course, you may disagree." No shit.

They're your words, opinions and statements. Own them. You wouldn't be sharing them if you didn't want them to be understood and turned into action.

When you attach a draft statement. No need to remind your higher headquarters that you're just a subordinate PAO who's only looking at one slice of pie--or leave blanks for them to fill in. You've got the keys to the information bus. You've connected your operational understanding to the higher headquarters' top lines—no one knows better than you what needs to be said. Besides, they don't need your permission to change your talking points, so why bother planting the seed that they might need changing?

When you key the microphone and share information or perspective with your staff. "I know I'm just the PAO here, but ..." Give us a break: you're a leader, a valuable member of the organization, a trained and experienced strategic thinker, and the commander's communication advisor. Try this: "What's up everybody, I'm the PAO so listen to me."

When helping leaders connect with their audiences. Have them speak from a position of authority. This is different from coming across as pompous or closed-minded; their public comments must represent an unapologetic belief in your organization's culture and values.

When your organization faces crisis. It sucks when bad things happen, but crisis shouldn't shatter your unit's strength and confidence. In the face of disaster, reinforce the importance of your mission and resilience of your people. Don't hide behind or defer to the investigations and decisions happening at higher levels: publicly and aggressively own the things your organization believes in, and the things your organization are doing within its span of control.

If you're so worried about being wrong that you need to add a caveat, maybe you don't have anything worth saying in the first place. Or maybe you've really got a question for your team instead of a statement.

Never apologize for having something to say. Having something to say is part of your job.

- Dave C.



It's Speech Season

Y'all know what time it is.

We're neck-deep in another summer of ceremonies and speeches as our leaders and colleagues change command, gain rank, retire, or move along to new assignments.

And you, the organization's top communications coach, will be in the center of it. You'll write your leaders' speeches, or at the very least give bullets or feedback. Embrace the opportunity to help the men and women standing in front of your members represent the organization and deliver messages with pride.

It's part of your job.

Here are a few nuggets we sling when looking over speeches and remarks: It's Not About You. Even your own promotion or retirement ceremony isn't about you.

Headline with the organization, service, and values and then double down on them. Anything you say about yourself should directly reinforce the organization, service and values your audience understands and supports. Protect America much?

Along that line ...

Thank People for a Purpose.

It's easy to spend most of your speech thanking your senior leaders for their leadership, mentors for their mentorship, service members for their service, and loved ones for their love. Make it count for something bigger. Thank your commander for empowering you to take action and solve problems, then remind the audience that they're all trusted to do the same.

Thank your family for being your rock through uncertain times (a Change of Command must-have), then tell your new formations you're even more committed to supporting their families throughout your tour.

Keep it Brief.

Years ago when I left the mighty 382nd Public Affairs Detachment, I showed my draft remarks to a trusted PAO colleague. She quickly pointed out I attempted to make 12 distinct points across the outline. Yikes. Keep it to two or three must-make points, then get off the X.

Limit Yourself to One Solid Self-Deprecating Joke.

This is a tough one. You want to make people laugh but you know it's unprofessional to poke fun at others or stray into controversial topics. I'll give you one pass to break the ice, but never forget, you're a leader and the U.S. military is serious business. Like I said, it's not about you, even at your own expense.

Get Away from the Podium.

When you're speaking from the heart, you're not going to need a script. Take control of your audience's eyes and ears. Grab the mic with confidence and walk the stage like a boss. You've only got two or three must-make points, so drive them home in your own words. If you're reading, you've already lost the crowd.

There are so many worthwhile books about presentations, speeches and engagements. I like Talk Like TED, and Dave B. has had a copy of The Lost Art of the Great Speech on his desk for at least eight years. Read and be better.

-Dave C.

Pending your questions.

Good morning Sir.

I'm an empowered badge-wearing member of your organization.

I'm now going to read you some words from a piece of paper.

This is a brief I was told to give this morning.

This script was reviewed several times by various staff leaders.

So I am not going to deviate from it.

Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah.

I only wrote like thirty percent of the content I'm briefing right now.

They removed some of the most important information from my script.

We weren't sure if the G2 had seen that information yet.

Or if they agreed with my assessment.

We don't want you to know two professional staff elements could potentially have different perspectives on a complicated topic.

Blah blah blah blah blah blah.

This script was approved 24 hours ago so most of the information is out of date.

Blah blah blah blah.

Are you listening?

It's hard to tell because I don't want to take my eyes off my script. Blah blah.

Maybe I'll sneak one peek.

It looks like you're just talking to the Command Sergeant Major at the front table while I'm briefing.

Maybe that's for the best.

Now I can just get through this faster and hopefully you won't have any questions.

My supervisors didn't tell me what to do if you ask any questions or want to have a discussion.

That isn't in my script.

This could've been an e-mail.

Blah blah blah.

Pending your questions.

- Dave C.



Be Loud

Teammates, our best and inspired work is all for nothing if we fail to execute the basic tasks that ensure audiences will receive the message.

Remember how we said you can't communicate effectively if you sound lame? You're not doing any better if you sound like nothing at all.

Very recently, a group of influential community leaders who support our military visited our organization.

Since Everyone is a VIP, our top leaders spent time personally thanking them for their support, in a nice spot outside our headquarters.

Mistake 1: It was right around the end of the work day, so motorcycles and huge trucks motored by throughout the commander's heartfelt remarks. The crowd struggled to hear anything.

It doesn't matter what you say if you're overpowered by rumbling trucks.

Just block off that road for 10 minutes.

... after that disappointing engagement, we brought our guests inside to watch a video. Our office has a kickass video team; they tell sweet, complete stories aligned with our forever lines and in support of our organization's aspirational culture. They are a great way to lead into a discussion with visitors.

Mistake 2: The tech dudes didn't test the video beforehand, and the volume was stupidly low ... and couldn't be fixed in the moment.

Our guests spent five minutes wondering about our lack of preparation and inability to work our systems ... rather than focusing on our messages and professionalism.

Never waste an opportunity to be loud, and be heard.

- Dave C.

The Muffin Lie

A well dressed lady with a basket came to the door of our new house. We recently moved and met most of the neighbors, but not all. “Nice,” I thought. “She brought muffins.”

No muffins but she said she was here to welcome us to the neighborhood. That’s nice too. She asked if we had a few minutes to talk. For a new neighbor? Of course we do. I offered her coffee or a la Croix. Everyone is a VIP at my house.

She started by showing us the county’s recreation activity catalogue then jumped into one of those free community magazines you can get in front of Harris Teeter.

“What the f--k is this?” my wife and I thought, “no muffins?”

She got deeper and started talking about select businesses in the area. Each talk accompanied with a typical pamphlet and a cheap trinket with the company’s logo stamped on it.

“Do you work for the town?” I asked.

“Yes!” she said, “Well, with the town. I work with the town and with these local businesses.”

It turns out each of these businesses paid to get into her muffin-less basket.

It also turns out that we will never go to any of these businesses because they invited themselves into our house under false pretenses.

Public affairs people understand the need to be forthright and truthful.

Not everyone does.

Be careful of the people you choose to represent your organization. You have to weed out the people who think they’re doing you a favor by duping the media and public.

Pick your spokesperson well and educate them on the need for truth.

Word will get around about the fake muffin basket lady and her team of con-artists. Hopefully the small businesses she represents will not be too badly damaged. You can’t afford the bad news and organizational reputation damage that will come if you appoint a dishonest spokesperson.

- Dave B.

Minimum Disclosure

Something happened somewhere, sometime recently, and it’s currently under investigation.

We’re announcing this thing now, in order to be transparent. Please don’t ask any additional questions, because we’re not prepared to answer them.

“This thing that happened is something we had to announce,” said a senior somebody. “We have many feelings about this thing that happened.” Please reference this quote in all subsequent media coverage.

Senior somebody cannot characterize his or her feelings in any way, due to an ongoing investigation, which we also cannot characterize. We direct these feelings toward our valued families, service members, neighbors, and multinational and host nation partners.

This thing, which we are deliberately not calling an accident, incident or event, happened. We are aware of the many news reports about this thing that have already been published. Our organization asks that you please do not read them because there is an ongoing investigation.

We can’t confirm even the most obvious information in these reports, because we haven’t received the required public statement concurrences from each staff directorate in order to receive approval from our chief of staff and commander.

If anything good comes of this thing, please direct all credit to our multinational partners, who did not have the access, equipment or knowledge to participate in the thing in the first place. Our Information Operations team really wants our multinational partners to be out front, in the lead, so that we can demonstrate regional stability.

If anything bad comes of this thing, we will accept full responsibility after a investigation is concluded. Please do not ask about this investigation or report its findings.

Our mission is important. The headquarters above the unit associated with this thing is tasked with a mission, which is consistent with Department of Defense policies and national strategic goals. This is or isn’t what the thing-associated unit was doing at the time, but it is a general statement of something we’ve been told to do. Please print this, also.

- Dave C.



You Know What I Mean

Let's not get wrapped around the axle about this. We have a lot on our plate. Take it easy. We will eat this elephant one bite at a time.

Is the juice worth the squeeze? We'll run this down. I've been around the block a few times, seen a couple of county fairs. Let's walk this dog to see if it hunts. No death by PowerPoint; you fuck the goat, I'll hold the tail. Let's put the final nail in the coffin, I don't want to get too spun up. Is it Friday yet? I feel like gouging my eye out. This guy is wrapped up too tight. It's like a monkey fucking a football bat. A true soup taco, or is it a shit sandwich? Semper gumbly, I guess. Wait until I get home and Household 6 hears about this, she'll have me show up with a 2 quart and a light coat of CLP. You picking up what I'm putting down?

After all, this is your goat rope; I'm just here for the show. I'm sitting at this goat rodeo and I'm like a hog looking at a wrist watch. It is what it is. There I was, knee deep in hand grenade pins...we need to get our heads together on this cluster fuck, level the bubbles and close the loop. After all, we can't get out of our own way. What's clear to me is that we don't know, what we don't know. Clear as mud.

Hurry up and wait, there's only 6 days and a wake up. Embrace the suck! We'll need to preheat this with the boss. What we have here is a self-licking-ice cream cone. Make a hole so we can push this round peg through the square hole. It's all ones and zeroes to me, dolphin speak.

It's time to pop smoke. Too bad, so sad. Don't let the door hit ya. I would tell you how I knew all these phrases, but then I'd have to kill you.

- Dave B.

Speaking Clearly

We wrote a lame post using only military cliches. I understood what we were saying, did you? Probably not.

Since the military is a small family with shared culture and values, we often think we are communicating better than we actually are. Using cliches are a large part of the problem.

Your boss loves them. Many bosses do. He loves to rattle off a catchy and trendy cliché for his audiences. "Let's level the bubbles here and once we're good, give it the sniff test."

That sounds foul to begin with but more importantly, understanding is easily lost.

Do this:

- Start with why and explain to your boss that the most important thing he does is communicate. He makes decisions and gives guidance but if he doesn't communicate that well, he fails and the organization fails.
- Teach him that though using cliches in speech may be fun, it's lazy and ineffective. Since there is no precise definition for a cliché, audiences likely have applied their own meanings.
- If your commander and peers continue to use cliches, you must take action. Start a cliché dictionary and define what each cliché means to your command and how to use them. The fallacy of cliches will quickly be discovered when you ask your boss what he means exactly by, "goat rodeo." Send your cliché dictionary to us and we will publish it on MaxDis; you will be hailed as a communication hero for bringing clarity through the ranks.

Cliches look really stupid in the news too. You must ban cliché use when conducting interviews and if someone does use one, trust your gut and ask the journalist not to use it.

I smell the barn, it's time to get on home and see mama.

- Dave B

Banned Topics

- The leak conversation.
- Your access or lack of access to the commander.
- Oh my gosh, you met that reporter once?
- Food.
- Your last meal.
- Your next meal.
- The meal you missed.
- If only...
- The number of e-mails in your inbox, and how hard it is to keep up.
- Your last job was great. Your last job sucked. Either way, it's irrelevant to the job at hand.
- How hard it was to find a parking spot.
- The way things used to be done.
- It's cold.
- It's hot.
- It's raining.
- Can you believe the wind out there?
- "So, what assignment are you up for next?"
- "I'm really hoping to stay in D.C. Fort Carson would be great too, though."
- If it's 99% complete it's not complete and you can't claim credit.
- Your e-mail is down?
- We don't have enough people.
- We don't have enough space.
- We don't have enough time.
- The validity of any commander's decision. Decisions have been made; it's time to execute.
- Anything sexual.
- Second references to big ideas you mentioned before, but have taken no action toward.
- Excuses.
- Efforts.
- How much leave you have.
- Vacations.
- Anybody's salary.
- Anybody's age.
- Reporters can be nasty. Just do your job.
- We're all glad you ran today, never mention it again.
- Crossfit.
- Oh man, you got hurt? Get healthy, never mention it again.

- Your knowledge of history is impressive. It doesn't matter unless it applies to the situation.
- Never, ever talk about someone else unless they are present.
- Wow, technology has advanced. Nuff said.
- Band camp stories are for band camp.
- Politics. Not our job so shut the hell up about it.
- Religion.
- Not impressed by the people you "know," and less impressed when you refer to them by their first name like I know them too.
- Because you knew someone 20 years ago doesn't mean you've known them for 20 years.
- You're overtasked.
- You're tired.

- Dave C.

Banned Words

- that
- has
- in order to
- but
- stated
- should
- illuminate
- utilize
- waiting
- fidelity
- good news story
- nested
- preheat
- level the bubbles
- dovetail
- kabuki dance

- Dave C.

Operations



PAO: “O” is for Operations

I was one of them. I was a PAO that was primarily concerned with what was happening at home. A wise commander once asked me, “Dave, my number one priority is operations. What’s yours?”

#messagerecieved Mine was operations too, beginning about 4 seconds after he asked me.

It’s easy for a public affairs guy to avoid what is going on in the world, in conflict. It’s easy to brief the hometown news, I love hometown news.

Fuck that. The reason we exist (big we, the Department of Defense exists) is to do operations around the world in order to protect America.

Lead the staff toward operations. The S1/J1 cares about personnel manning? Sure, but help him brief personnel in the context of deployability. What about the J3? Does he care only about the next NTC rotation? He should care about where NTC is training you to go.

By caring, reading, analyzing and briefing operations; real world defense related issues you will make your entire organization more relevant. You’ll key them in to the rest of the world. You’ll educate. You’ll motivate.

Do it.

- Dave B.



Everything is Ops

Target audience analysis is a thing. In fact, it is a very important thing. No doubt, a good PAO studies the information environment and provides plans for messaging campaigns and products that will meet commander's messaging intent right down to each target audience segment. It is what we do. Then why are so many PAOs frustrated when their herculean staff planning work does not get the time of day for implementation? (We are trying to contribute to the big "W" after all.)

Often times, we fail to realize that our TAA does not account for the most important stakeholders – the Operations professionals that approve our concepts.

"Ops" do not expect to receive information in public affairs terms – shocking, we know. The Army infantry chief of staff or Marine executive officer serves as the gatekeeper to the "Old Man". The gatekeeper wants to see and hear you confidently lay out your CONOP in operational terms. The gatekeeper expects your next great command narrative or social media campaign is synchronized within existing lines of effort to gain desired effects in the operational environment.

But at DINFOS they told me I am "special staff"? "I should have access to the commander." That's sweet.

You earn access to the commander. If you do not have it now...it is not them, it is you.

Here are some tips to get on the Ops train before it pulls out of station, with or without you on it.

- **Formats.** Use whatever format the J3 uses. The J3 was hand selected by your commander, just like your gatekeeper. The J3 is going places. The J3 may be in the approval chain for product dissemination. He or she might like to see your products in Ops format before providing the stamp of approval to route your masterpiece up the chain. The J3 also tends to use similar product to what you have seen your entire career at professional military schooling.
- **Quad charts.** Ops guys love 'em. Why? Quad chart compartmentalize data into a visually predictable format. Not sold on quads. Think you have a better format. It doesn't matter. Your gatekeeper is a proponent.
- **Meetings.** Go to the important ones like the routine training meeting in garrison or the targeting meetings in one of our many beautiful deployed locations. Our friend the J3 is running this meeting. Tell the team what you are providing for future events and operations to gain effects. Don't worry about briefing what you did last week, people that need to know read your SITREP..
- **SITREP?** You mean the thing the J3 writes everyday? Yes, buttercup. Find the battle rhythm that works for your section. In the friendly confines of the homeland, a weekly report is about right on the mark. When deployed, the frequency increases. All the other sections do SITREPs so you should too, but make your product matter. Every stakeholder on the to: and cc: line should know where to look in your SITREP for pertinent information for his or her staff section. Take time, in person, to let your fellow staff know where to look.

Know the Ops game and play it well. Your gatekeeper needs to perceive you as an Ops officer playing PAO.

What ma'am doesn't know, won't hurt her.

- T. Mayne

The Tactical, the Operational, the Strategic

I work for a strategic command. You'd think I only would care about pie in the sky, strategic stuff.

A Coalition vehicle broke down in Kabul the other day. The engine caught fire, the fire was extinguished and nothing else happened. Who cares right? It's a squad leader problem. I care.

I care because tactical things often end up with strategic results. Our NCO [on her own initiative] called the local media outlets [because we have that relationship] just to let them know what happened and we watched the information environment closely.

We were ready for our adversaries to turn it into propaganda. We were ready for the locals to make an issue out of it because we disrupted the traffic. Since it was a Coalition vehicle, our public affairs rep for that country was ready for queries from his home country about the maintenance issues they've been having. Public affairs is layered across the tactical, operational and strategic.

Good and experienced public affairs officers:

- **Know operations.** They have a close eye on tactical operations. They know what's going on in their organizations.
- **Can see the future.** Understand what events can impact the information environment and how.
- **Act.** If you understand what's going on and can see the future, then you act. You sometimes take risk, you don't always get permission, you act.

Bring together the tactical, operational and strategic together for your organization.

- Dave B.



Must-Haves

In our office we have a white board with the words, "Must Haves" written quickly across the top.

When we get close to an event the person responsible reviews the list in front of the rest of our crew. Here are the must-haves, and why:

Forever Lines.

Always, always give context. One way to be sure you give context is via your organization's forever lines. "Mr. John Smith was killed while performing range control duties on a live fire range. John was participating in training with 1st Brigade. 1st Brigade trains for and is ready to deploy anywhere in the world. John was a key part in preparing 1st Brigade's Soldiers for combat." Context, give it out like free condoms at the health clinic.

5 Ws.

I can't tell you how many times we have had confusion over the exact location or time. If you're dealing with operations forward, the location that your operations section reports may not be translatable to the public. Local time or Eastern? Local. The 5 Ws you put in language meant to be public has to be verifiable and understandable by the public and media. Google everything you know reporters are going to Google. Sort this out before sending the communication guidance.

Who else needs to know?

Think through it. On any given communication venture many people

need awareness. Remember John Smith? You probably need to involve/inform your communication counterparts at higher HQ, 2 or 3 levels up; the contracting company; the local police PIO; probably even the Army. Information travels fast and wide. This incident will hit the Army Media relations desk--given that, who needs to know? Don't be afraid to reach beyond your immediate chain of command. Stretch. YOU are the PAO on the ground.

What else can we add?

Here we are considering additional quotes, graphics, photos, video or comment. Is there a subject matter expert that can provide a sit down with the media? What about some photo from your unit's archives? You might be able to show the 'type' of range that John was working on. What about a picture or B-roll of the Range Control building, or the type of targets that John was working on? Be clear about why you are adding these things. You will see these photos run on the local news, vice photos that the editor finds on Google image search, or his old B-roll where everyone is still wearing ACUs.

Must Haves have forced us to think all the way through an event from a public perspective. Try it at your place.

- Dave B.

The Bungee Cord Journey

There's a bungee cord sitting between your organization and your commander's end state. Keep following it, and eventually you'll get there.

Along the way, things will pull the bungee cord in different directions. Distractions, confusion, competing agendas, missteps, and legitimate crises will all come up.

These things will make your journey along the bungee cord messy, and much less comfortable, but when all is said and done you will probably reach your end state.

We Public Affairs Officers can tighten the slack on that bungee cord. Correct, clear and clean communication will keep your organization from getting pulled too far off course in the first place, and then easily snap back to its main course.

We can inspire organizational resiliency with the way we communicate through crises, synchronize our talking points for important partners, and build internal culture and awareness.

Things are going tug on your organization's bungee cord. The key is not to hope those things don't come around ... it's the way you directly communicate through those things in order to refocus on your mission.

- Dave C.



A 2018 Definition for OPSEC

Let's have the OPSEC talk.

Traditionally, this is the program through which we hide and protect information that could give our enemies an advantage, and put our troops and mission at risk.

I think we all agree, as Americans and members of the armed forces, that we don't want our enemies to know our shit. We all know it's important, right? I certainly know that. It's important that we all acknowledge that this is extremely important. However, it's time to take a refreshed look at the way we think about OPSEC.

Here's the definition of OPSEC:

"A process of identifying critical information and analyzing friendly actions attendant to military operations and other activities to: identify those actions that can be observed by adversary intelligence systems; determine indicators and vulnerabilities that adversary intelligence systems might obtain that could be interpreted or pieced together to derive critical information in time to be useful to adversaries, and determine which of these represent an unacceptable risk; then select and execute countermeasures that eliminate the risk to friendly actions and operations or reduce it to an acceptable level."

Did you make it through that? I didn't. A bunch of jibberish.

Let me propose a new definition for OPSEC, for a generation of strategic thinkers and communicators in 2018:

Protect, and share, information when it helps us keep America safe.

Pretty clear how this is different, right? Let's start managing information, rather than exclusively hiding it. Of course, let's guard and compartmentalize information and intelligence when appropriate. But let's balance the way

we use information for our benefit, rather than throw the OPSEC blanket over everything we know.

Let's actively share accurate information when it provides valuable context and background to the people who give us resources, authorities, approvals and support (such as the American public, or our international partners, or our senior leaders).

I envision a future where--when resources, authorities, approvals and support are at risk--a spokesperson tells a reporter:

- “Due to operational security, I must tell you the ways in which this command is trained, armed, and organized to protect America from dangerous threats.”
- “Due to operational security, I have to give you more context and background to demonstrate the care and precision with which our forces operate in combat.”
- “Due to operational security, so that Americans continue to trust this organization with American lives and treasure, I am going to painstakingly lay out each detail of this mission's timeline, weaponry, location, plan and intelligence.”

After all, this is all about the security of our operations, right? I wouldn't say an operation is “secure” if it's misunderstood, disapproved or under-resourced.

Now, every officer can be an OPSEC officer.

- Dave C.



The PAO's Four Jobs in the JOC

We write often about spending time in your organization's Joint Operations Center because it is your organization's hub for centralizing and sharing information.

It is the one-stop-shop for information for your commander, their subordinate commanders, and your higher headquarters. Get your team a dedicated desk in the JOC, and put a body against it.

Over time, I've heard PAOs flatly reject the idea that they'd invest a team member's time in manning their JOC or TOC (tactical operations center). Looking back, I should have challenged that idea: where were they going to track current operations and collaborate with the staff?

There are many innovative and unique ways an expert communicator can contribute to the mission while sitting in the JOC, surrounded by staff peers and military professionals. Here are the PAO JOC basics; make sure you can do this on your first day in your organization's JOC, to add value:

1. Learn and Know the Ground Truth

Your job as an expert communicator in the JOC starts on the receiving end of communication. Know how to find and comprehend information at the same pace as your ops, intel and support staff experts.

Use the same systems and acronyms as the battle captain. Attend and participate in CONOP briefs. As operations occur, have a working knowl-

edge of the ground truth to accurately explain the 5Ws, background and context with your fellow PAOs and higher headquarters.

2. Research and Draft Public Affairs Guidance

PAG, as a doctrinal format, is time consuming and generally too complex to be useful to spokespersons addressing crises. However, it's easy to write when you have a working knowledge of your organization's operations. Plus, all PAOs are familiar with the format.

When the information you need to build PAG isn't in your head, you'll find it in the JOC. Synchronize your PAG-writing process so you're feeding complete, recommended language to your higher headquarters at the same time your operations officer or commander is submitting CONOPs and SITREPs.

3. Understand and Meet Requirements and Timelines

Timelines and priorities change quickly in the military. Connect the rest of your Public Affairs team to the JOC's main efforts ... and vice versa. Be a Public Affairs metronome: follow up on promised actions and don't let things slip through the cracks.

4. Inform Staff on the Media

Since you're the PAO, of course you're going to have a system to see the news. Don't abuse that connection to surf Facebook or screw around on the Internet.

Just like the intel team is making sure the JOC is aware of new information, you should call headlines and summaries as you see breaking news related to your forces, operating environment, resources, authorities and support. Make it your business to be the first and most informed source of surprising news.

The JOC is your open office. Your news room. Embrace it.

- Dave C.

First, Get the Facts.

Remember SAPP? Security, Accuracy, Propriety and Policy? The Accuracy part is based on the facts ... seem obvious? In practice, people sometimes lose sight of this.

This is about the truth! The facts. The real deal. This isn't a post about bias or the lack thereof.

Once upon a time, I received a breathless call from a subordinate unit. We were asked to provide input to a statement another government agency was going to make. The statement seemed fair enough, it was well written, made sense and we were pressed for time. The statement protected our organization's equities and protected future operations. We were in a rush, so if the statement looked good we needed to ship it, right? Not so fast ... did anyone check the actual facts? The statement looked great and we were in a hurry, but we still needed to check in with our old friend, The Truth.

We spend a lot of time determining the message, the forever lines. Often we spend time word-smithing an RTQ. We build contingencies into public affairs guidance based on fictional, contingency events. This is all good, right and worth your time. These exercises are only useful when you've used the true facts as your baseline.

Leaders will tell you, "Hey PAO, we'll need to be prepared to talk about this publicly." Sure we will. Since you are connected with operations and understand what your organization is doing, and did, you will be prepared to talk publicly based on the actual, real situation. Blindly parroting your pre-approved public affairs guidance is foolish and dangerous. Just as an operation's progression deviates from the CONOP, your final statement will reflect the ground truth in a way your PAG logically cannot.

Even in the public relations industry where fake news, lying and deceit is a known tactic, the true pros tell you to start with the facts. The celebrated PR guy, Michael Sitrick, "The Wizard of Spin" has 10 rules of engagement. Rule #1? "First, get the facts."

We've said it before: if you are slow, you lose the opportunity to be right. Here's a secret: you also lose the opportunity to be right when you are wrong. Now go and do likewise.

- Dave B.

Getting Ready for Bad Times

What if somebody dies? What if a helicopter crashes? What if somebody dies in a helicopter crash? What if it's a car accident? What if somebody gets lost in the woods? What if somebody gets lost in the woods, and a helicopter crashes into them?

Life is full of what-ifs, friends. All of these situations would be tragic and horrible, and you'll be one to talk about them. Public Affairs and crisis comms planning can be a morbid business when you've got to ask yourself questions like these.

But are they the right questions?

You can't predict every contingency even though it's sometimes tempting to build it all into your Public Affairs guidance or staff estimate. It doesn't necessarily do harm to put in the extra work and consider five or 10 or 30 different ways things could go wrong, but chances are you aren't investing your time for your organization's maximum benefit. Instead of going down the "what if" whirlpool, here are the MaxDisclosure rules for contingency planning.

Show where and how you can reinforce context.

You can't and don't need to predict every bad scenario, but you do need to show some example statements and Q&As demonstrating ways to stay on message when you and your spokespersons are in reaction mode. You can do this with two or three general contingency examples, applying with your forever lines and must-haves.

Know the situation as well as your operations officer does.

For all the contingency planning I don't do, I make up for it by following my units' activities very closely. This way, we adjust and take action in real time rather than spend precious time gathering facts or playing catch-up after an unexpected catastrophe. It takes less than one minute to start your briefing card. We like to use that minute when we know the situation's context, so we position ourselves accordingly.

Pay attention to your commander.

He or she are likely discussing "risk to mission" and "risk to force" with their subordinate and higher headquarters commanders. Align your contingency planning to this and you'll be speaking their language.

- Dave C.

Action



When you are Slow, You Miss the Opportunity to be Right.

While your statement is tied up in bureaucratic staff buffoonery, your higher headquarters is writing a statement that lacks your operational context and commander's guidance.

Meanwhile, savvy reporters are putting together off the record statements and launching that first bit of breaking news without your forever lines.

Always be right. Accurate and truthful. But if you are going to be slow, you won't be any of those things.

Set an uncomfortably early deadline. Burn whatever relationships you must in order to forego, or quick-turn, a staff section's review of your statement (if you add value to the organization, they'll get over it). Have templates, contact lists, and computer systems ready to cut steps out of the process. Understand and track your organization's activities alongside the staff, so you don't have to ask questions later.

Do you want to be right? Then be right. But don't be slow. It isn't one or the other.

- Dave C.

Don't Try

We iterate. We try and fail, and try again. Sometimes we fail again. Sometimes we succeed. We're good with that, usually something good happens and it's useful. Here's the thing, no one cares if you're trying.

"There's likely a place in paradise for people who tried hard, but what really matters is succeeding."

General (Retired) Stanley McChrystal

We only credit and report what we ship and the effect it had; that's all that counts. Report only what you ship and you'll gain a reputation of an effective team.

"It's 2018 so I'm going to start this great new workout program." Nope, no one cares. Better, "It's March and the new workout program I started is really yielding results." Yep, this is important. "We're working on a project which will change the way the Department of Defense communicates." Try to contain your excitement. Instead report, with a humble smile, "We improved Department of Defense communication."

Science supports our cultural approach, without the technical science talk people get a premature boost by publicly stating their intentions and therefore are less likely to accomplish their goal. The reward was served prior to the goal being completed.

Reporting only your accomplished effect is a shift in thinking, people are accustomed to getting a pat on the back for efforts. Train yourself and your team to only care about effects, not efforts.

This approach is especially applicable if your boss likes to get involved in your business. Want him in? Tell him what you're working on before it's done. He'll be sure to hook you up with a few 'happy to glads.'

You may be concerned your bosses don't know what you're doing. Doesn't matter, you'll condition them to find out what you accomplished and the effect it had.

Now go and do likewise.

Dave B.-

Keep Driving

“A circular yellow signal means “caution” and indicates that the signal is about to turn red. Stop for a yellow signal unless you are too close to the intersection to stop safely – in that case, drive cautiously through the intersection. Never speed up for a yellow signal to “beat” the red signal.”

- North Carolina Department of Transportation

I don't stop for yellows. I go.

There is plenty to do. There are plenty of reasons not to get things done. Is it legal? Moral? Ethical? What will the commander say? Is it in our lane? Do we have the resources? What are the second order effects?

These are yellow lights. The answers can only be found if you proceed.

You cannot stop just because there are questions. It just means you have to determine the answers.

Just because we have to do a legal review, it doesn't mean we have to stop all progress, get on the lawyer's agenda and wait for a memorandum to be produced. It only means a legal review is part of the process.

Maybe you need to find a funding source, maybe you need to determine the second order effects. Whatever you need to do to get to it done, you do but you do it in stride. Keep driving.

Yellow lights are often set up in the bureaucratic system to ensure due diligence takes place. Plenty of people and agencies inject yellow light questions; it's the bureaucrat's job. Yellow lights are great and part of the process. They are not in the system to stop the process; they're yellow not red. Answer the yellow light questions while continuing the drive. Each time you allow the bureaucracy to stop you, your initiative stalls, and time and resources are wasted.

- Dave B.

Run to the Guns

There's almost always one good reason to do nothing.

Maybe it's too risky. Maybe it's too uncomfortable to respond to that media query. Maybe somebody will be offended if you tell the truth. Maybe someone disagrees with you.

Maybe, instead, all you need is one good reason to take action.

When the situation is complicated, understand the context, but know the best motivator driving you toward engaging.

- Dave C.



Generate Options

I wrote a draft press release and sent it to my higher headquarters for consideration and release. They kept the factual information but changed 100 percent of the words I used. I didn't care, I gave them an option and they made a decision. On to the next task.

We recommended a respond-to-query posture to our commander. He said we'd have to go active. We told him how we would do that, and then took action. He appreciated our recommendation and the discussion because we gave him options.

My best writer came to me with three ideas for articles she wanted to work on. I gave her a fourth topic to dig into instead. Did she fail me? Hell no, she thought hard about her work and made achievable, feasible recommendations. She gave me options.

We want to make our buildings and physical environment look good and reflect the pride we have in our organization. One of our team members did a lot of research and graphics work to show the project's potential. Resources are scarce, and the projects haven't been completed yet. However, our senior leaders understand the potential, and we're one step closer to a tangible decision. The options are on the table.

A staff officer from a different division “briefed” our entire command team on an initiative he was running. He showed a goofy video, regurgitated broad generalities and warned that it would be a long road, with no indications of tangible action. He offered no options, suffered public humiliation and was removed from the project.

What's my point? Your influence and success is directly tied to your abili-

ty to generate well-prepared and -reasoned options, allowing commanders to make command-level decisions. You're only as good as the options you can offer.

- You can only generate real options after you become intimately familiar with the situation and the organization's priorities. Do the research to build a baseline of what's worked in the past, for your organization and others.
- Generating options doesn't mean throwing all of the possibilities on the table and making the boss decide. Have a recommendation and know the top two or three courses of action, inside and out. Give your commander a tie-breaking vote, not the Cheesecake Factory menu.
- Don't let emotion or ego get in the way. It's not about you, it's about what's best for your organization. You aren't the commander so don't try to make unilateral decisions.
- Make it achievable. "Options" should be relentlessly focused on accomplishing the mission, not driving your agenda of wanting more people, equipment, access or policy.
- Exude confidence; tell people you're a leader who can achieve scaled effects with what you have, not sit back and bemoan "if only" you had more.
- Be ready for curveballs, don't get attached to plans and ideas. Situations change rapidly. When they do, generate new and better options that address your organization's changing reality.
- Never stop. You got shot down five, ten, twenty times? That's irrelevant. Your job is to generate options. Even if it's your 21st shot, approach the situation with fresh eyes, incorporate the things you've learned about your leaders and your organization, and make more options.

- Dave C.

"Here, I've Attached a Draft."

- "Please let me know if you'll require talking points for this operation."
- "That's really a question for the service/COCOM/DOD-level PAOs to decide how to answer."
- "Do you think the CG will want us to be active about this?"
- "We're waiting for the commander to approve the final plan before we start drafting PAG."

Nope. If you find yourself saying these or similar statements, shut your mouth and sit back down at your PAG-drafting machine (this is what I call my computer).

Big event, exercise or operation coming up where you're going to need multiple communicators to be on the same script? Go ahead and be the first to deliver a tangible, written way forward.

Four things this does for you and your command:

1. Now you know your position and talking points, and you can point to a tangible place where they've been articulated. You've proven to yourself, your command and your partner organizations that you've got a firm grasp of the mission. In this process, you've filled your information gaps, defined your audience, and identified the communication risks that only become apparent when you write.
2. Everything that follows will be a variant of your work. Writing statements and Q&As is tedious and boring, most PAOs will take any excuse to copy and paste someone else's work. Even if others make tweaks and adjustments along the way, some (or most) of your suggestions will survive. Enable their lizard brains so that you're the one who sets the stage for great and effective communication.
3. You can shove your recommendations down peoples' throats. They disagree with your posture or messages? Great, ask them for their own recommenda—oh wait, they don't have anything drafted. Ideally, you will mobilize others into action and end the ceaseless back-and-forth of "ideas" that doesn't generate a tangible result. There's now a written document that is sitting in their inbox, awaiting their review. You will start, and be at the center of, all the conversations about your own communications plan.
4. You can cross that shit off your list and move on to another meaningful task. Brief the commander that you're driving the comms plan development with and for the relevant headquarters.

Next Step: Go ahead and write a draft for your organization's next communication initiative. This will be easy since you're already a savvy PAO: you

understand the plan, your commander's intent, and the operating environment.

- "Here, I've attached a draft."
- "Recommend release at your headquarters' level, with the following proposed statement."
- "My commander will want to be active about this,
- "We don't have the whole plan, but we know the following Q&As will be useful moving forward."

Worst case scenario? Nobody will use it and you will have wasted your time. (This is worth the risk).

- Dave C.



STPO: Something to Puke On

So you have to write a speech or talking points for an engagement. Your commander has an idea of what he wants to say. He's going to say it in his own voice. This doesn't mean you don't try.

I'm a great speech writer. I mean, like my shit is magic. Yet, very few times has my commander ever used more than 50% of my actual text. He's used ideas, he's used excerpts but very rarely has he ever used full major portions. The same will likely be true for you. You still owe him or her your best.

You owe your commander Something to Puke On.

Here is what you do:

- Ask him if he has an idea or topic.
- Don't schedule a meeting, if he needs to have a meeting with you, why not just write it himself. Ask him in the hallway or something.
- Ask someone close to the subject. If its a family speech, ask the family group leader. If its for garbage, ask the chaplain.
- Since you are in touch with what your organization is doing, you generally know what the thing should say.
- Write it and know your commander will change it. You served your purpose, you gave him something to puke on.

- Dave B.

What We Said Last Time

Remember last time something like this happened?

I don't know for sure, but I think it was a few months ago. I probably have that email saved in my sent items, let me see if I can find it.

I know, things were a bit different back then, but this is kind of the same now. No, I know, this time it's different people, in a different place, with a different mission, but that thing we said last time seemed to work. Damn, where is that old email?

Oh well, maybe I can just look up the news coverage from last time. A few outlets ran with that quote, and it worked then. Do you remember which ones?

Nah, I can't remember either. It's too bad, because I'd really just like to copy what we said last time. I don't see the point in writing a couple new sentences when the thing we said last time seemed to work for that different situation. Do you think our higher headquarters saved the thing we said last time?

Well, I called our higher headquarters. They didn't save that thing we said last time either, but they really need to know what they should say about this thing this time. I guess some reporters have been calling them, or something. I don't see the rush, tell them to wait until we find what we told them to say last time.

Man, do you think the reporters remember? If we've answered their questions about something kind of like this in the past, why can't they just use those same answers. Do you think we can get away with saying our position hasn't changed?

I don't know, I don't think they entirely understand what's happened this time. They said we haven't made it clear. I'm not sure they really need any more details anyway.

Okay, I couldn't find what we said last time, but here's what we said when something like this happened two times ago. Things were really different back then, but I think we can make it work. Yeah, just copy and paste those lines and make it a bit more general.

Do you think that will work?

- Dave C.

Less than a Minute

The average American types 38-40 words per minute. The average English sentence length is about 14 words.

Do the math: you've got time to make an impact.

This is great news for you and your team members! It's really, really easy to write things, and you have all the tools to do so:

1. **Your brain.** You're already using this to understand your organization's priorities and consider the communications opportunities and impacts.
2. **Miscellaneous.** You'll almost always have a computer, but I like drafting lines in a notebook, sitting in front of our fish tank. Even in "the field" as a Brigade Combat Team PAO, I had a chair, table, laptop and cup of coffee available in the TOC whenever I needed to write a statement or PA estimate.

Of course, one sentence is rarely enough. Whether it's a whole article or statement, or a series of one- or two-sentence lines like cutlines or Q&As, it's easy to get overwhelmed. I used to waste time searching for something to copy and paste, only to end up with language that didn't quite suit that day's situation or product. It saves time and improves quality when you go ahead and start with an originally written sentence, crafted by your brain and informed by your close familiarity with your organization.

Leave for your next meeting one minute later than usual, and use that time to put something into writing that nobody else is in a position to do. That's a valuable thing.

You'll only burn less than one additional calorie for that one sentence of writing. Eat your peeled, raw cucumber slice and get back to work.

- Dave C.

Less Than a Minute, Part 2

It takes less than one minute to draft one sentence in your own words.

Then, as time permits, it might take two minutes to re-read that sentence and make it better. On some occasions, up to five minutes to research the information you'd like to add or verify. Another one or two minutes to show the sentence to someone else, and discuss it.

I've had Public Affairs professionals spend hours and days — I'm not exaggerating — writing a collection of sentences like photo cutlines or Q&As for public affairs guidance. Even then, the final product is an exhausting collection of copy and pasted lines. Hours! These types of products are not major initiatives ... they're incidental elements of your day-to-day responsibilities. Just like you exhale because you inhaled, you write these sentences because you have a clear understanding of your organization's priorities.

How do you drive toward a first draft and avoid turning small requirements into day-long hauls? These tips are basic, but important enough to discuss and adopt with your team:

Set a deadline. Even if it's arbitrary and make-believe. This empowers you to tell visitors and distractions, "I've got to get this off my desk by 10, can I call you later?"

Outline what you need to say. I do this in a notebook or on a white board.

Use three big ideas, tied to your forever lines, as your guidelines.

Time yourself. Start with 10 minutes to write 10 Q&As, or talking points. You can go back and edit later. I bet you'll find after 10 minutes you'll have more than your planned amount of entries, and a list of more thoughts to explore.

Say it in your own words. Imagine your copy and paste function is disabled. Use your knowledge of the situation to write something original, and you won't waste time searching through old e-mails and releases.

No-judgment first reviews. The point of the first draft is that it will get better as a second draft. Whether you're the writer or the editor, it's not about you.

We teach the inverted pyramid so you can organize news articles and press releases fast, on deadline. Photographers pay attention while shooting an event so describing the action in a cutline is second nature. Spokespeople on the podium have a matter of seconds to answer reporters' questions—the least you can do is invest a minute or two into the answer on the front end. All of these things are ultimately just words and sentences on a page, so don't overthink them.

- Dave C.

Try To Solve The Problem Yourself

Try to solve the problem yourself, and you'll be proud!! This is my kid's favorite show, and I often sing this song to my co-workers.

As a young professional, my esteemed co-blogger was one of my first supervisors.

One day, I brought a routine press release draft into his office for his review. He looked at me and said, "Do I need to read this?" Left unsaid: "Is there something wrong with this release that you're not able to identify and fix yourself? Do you require this level of close supervision?"

My response: "Nope, I've got it."

Another time, I came into his office with a problem. Can't remember what it was, but likely something bureaucratic or tedious. His response, "Dave. I never want to hear about this problem again." Left unsaid: "Your job is to catch things like this and drive solutions before it hits my desk."

These are important lessons for any leader or staff officer, but I consider them the core of being a civilian deputy director. Make issues disappear, solve the problem yourself, and create space for more work.

Fun aside: I got so used to writing and releasing press releases without my supervisor's review, that I failed to re-adjust my processes when a new officer took over the office. Uncomfortable conversation, "What do you mean you sent out a press release that I haven't reviewed?" Know your operating environment, and don't do any work on auto-pilot.

- Dave C.

Action Begets Action

... while talking merely begets more talking.

So, if you need something to happen, understand what you can do to drive action.

Hint: It's not talk.

Tangible effects require tangible options.

- Dave C.

Be a Drummer

Conductors are silent.

They stand in front of the orchestra and give direction, but they don't actually make any music.

The drummer is also directing their band: giving cues and keeping everyone on the same tempo ... while also producing something for the listener to hear and appreciate.

Conductor PAOs might manage task trackers and report results, but they aren't writing or speaking or creating.

No matter your rank or position, strive to be a Drummer PAO for your team.

Let your people and experts do the great work they're going to do ... and find something tangible to offer your organization given your skills and experience. Put down the camera, but add tangible value. Write something others can use.

Produce. Ship.

- Dave C.

Having Time and Making Time

I didn't have make time to provide a statement before the reporter's 8 p.m. deadline.

I'm in the JOC helping my organization through a communication crisis. Would've been real nice if I'd had made time to identify our forever lines and operational must-haves earlier.

I made a quick visit to the Pentagon but didn't have make time to visit several important friends and partners.

I should eat less and exercise more, but don't have make time to go to the gym.

I know what to do, I shouldn't be a slob, and so many things are part of my job, but, honestly, who has makes time for all of that?

Time is our only limited resource. No one gives it to us, but we still make choices and control the time we do have. Maybe it's absolutely right that we pass on opportunities so we can be efficient with our time.

Either way, its our decision to own.

- Dave C.



The Waiting Place

“Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or a plane to go or the mail to come, or the rain to go or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No, or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting. Waiting for the fish to bite, or waiting for wind to fly a kite, or waiting around for Friday night, or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake, or a pot to boil, or a Better Break, or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants, or a wig with curls, or Another Chance. Everyone is just waiting.”

- Oh, The Places You'll Go! by Dr. Seuss

The waiting place is just a terrible place to be. How often are we passively waiting? Wasting time.

- When will Smitty, our 46Q, get to the training event? We're waiting to hear back from the unit.
- When will we be able to get that B-roll we need to finish the video?
- We're waiting for the new lens to come in.
- When will we ship that story to the post newspaper? We're waiting for the PAO to approve it.

We don't wait. We can't, there's too much goodness to be done for our

organization. Waiting puts someone else in control. It's passive. If we're waiting on Fred to get back to us, Fred is in charge. When we take an active approach to things, we're in charge. We like to be in charge. The truth is, others like it when we're in charge too. People we work with appreciate our active and consistent approach to getting things done.

We manage tasks with a tracker and have productive weekly discussions around the action we are taking ... everything is guided by our next steps.

Our conversations look like this:

- When will Smitty, our 46Q, get out to the training event? Next step: SGT Jones from the unit will get back to us by this afternoon, if I don't hear from him I will walk over there and sort it out. We'll know by close-of-business.
- When will we be able to get that B-roll we need to finish the video? Next step Our lens broke so we ordered a new one and it will be here by Monday. I talked with Gil on the shipping. If it's not here Monday we will borrow a camera from Joe, talked with him on it already.
- When will we ship that story to the post newspaper? Next step, Dave is taking one last look and he said he'll send it to Tom. I'll talk with him right after this.

Are you going to be passive, put someone else in charge and wait or will you take control? "Somehow you'll escape all that waiting and staying. You'll find the bright places where Boom Bands are playing."

- Dave B.

The Point of No Return

At MaxDis we talk a lot about getting things done. We assume because you are reading, you're already interested in taking the initiative and bettering your organization ... even if you're not directly told to do so.

One of the fundamental ways we plan at work and in life is by recognizing the point of no return. Imagine a raid force speeding to an objective, maybe they are headed to capture a bad guy. There is a point in space and time when they have committed the force. When, regardless how the environment has changed, they are going in. Sometimes it's a location on the ground, sometimes it's time or enemy based, sometimes it's a combination of several factors. In the same vein, anytime before that point, the force can abort. If the environment changes, if a helicopter breaks, if the force is detected ahead of time, if someone else shows up on the objective: the force can turn around and no one is the wiser.

In our communications shop we plan the same way. We build public affairs guidance and graphics to support a mission, we align our resources against a public engagement or we plan travel to support a particular initiative. We put all the parts in place and plan as if we are about to execute something, while recognizing the point where we will commit.

Many times we go all the way up to the edge of the point of no return, and hold right there. That's uncomfortable for some, especially other staff sections who want us to use the PAG we staffed through intel channels, or execute the contract we've prepared. Yeah buddy, if we're waiting for our leaders' buy-in, or watching how events on the ground shake out, we're hanging out right here at 99 percent complete until we decide to flip the switch. It's how we give our command options and avoid being slow.

It's a useful way to think and be in life and at work: aggressively plan for execution. If you decide not to execute, shelve your plans and move on to the next operation.

- Dave B.

99% Complete

Trackers organize and energize my daily routine. We've talked about this before, but let's double down on the details.

When I put our team's initiatives, next steps and priorities in writing, it takes them out of my head, giving me a mind like water and a guide for my day (not to mention a printed task list to review during meetings or while sitting by the fish).

When small teams share the same tracker, we help each other determine, make time for, and hold ourselves to next steps. Team syncs, when held daily, are quick and effective. Let's talk about Finishing the Job.

I often question the inclusion of the "% Completed" column on my trackers. If I know the next step, why does it matter if I'm 10% or 40% through the project?

The only time it truly matters is when a task reaches 99%. It's inevitable. Something is so close to done because the major effort is in the past: maybe the media engagement is complete, or that video has been published, or the crisis has passed. We all need that reminder, an opportunity, to consider the small things we can do to follow up and follow through. These are common sense, but some easy "final 1% next steps" include:

- Follow up with a thank you to the reporter and start working on the next engagement.
- Send the coverage to the service members or leaders who participated in the media event (bonus if you can send a hard copy magazine or newspaper). Ask them what else about their jobs is worth sharing, or could make news.
- When will you return for the rest of the story? If it's an article/video about a training course, head back to their graduation for a quote and photo to throw on social media. If it's a deployment ceremony or training event, hit them back during their deployment for an update. If it's a change of command, schedule an interview six months later to see how it's going.
- Is this one of your folks' best work? Put a mark on the wall to submit it for a Keith L. Ware award or include in their next award or NCOER.
- AAR the way your team worked together through the event. Formalize your lessons into your SOP. Even better, bring in the other staff sections you worked with.

When this post is published, it'll be 99% complete. It'll be 100% when I've shared it with colleagues, Tweeted it, evaluated the readership stats, and made a list of follow-on topics we can write about based on this.

- Dave C.

The Fish Don't Care

We missed an opportunity to speak up and contribute during a command-wide meeting. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

Our higher headquarters changed our statement and didn't take as aggressive a stance as we hoped. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

We've been directed to do something that we don't think is the best use of our time. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

A media outlet published an inaccurate report that makes our organization look bad. Our fish don't care. What's the next step Nobody called us for a comment. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

All of our organization's branded slides and documents look terrible. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

We're getting moved to a different office because of construction. Our fish don't care that they've been removed from the tank and are getting all jostled around. What's the next step?

Had to come into work on a Saturday. Our fish are ecstatic, because they got some extra special weekend food.

We're deploying. Our fish don't care, because we arranged for someone else to take care of them. What's the next step?

Our equipment sucks. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

Something bad happened and our organization lost valuable credibility in the community. Our fish don't care. What's the next step?

The past is in the past. Let's be fish.

- Dave C.

A Better Way to Do It

"I know a better way to do that. You should've done it this way." Not unless you've attached a draft, bucko.

Put up or shut up. Be part of the solution.

- Dave C.

Talking Yourself Out of It

When you have a bias for inaction, you can talk yourself out of doing anything.

Do you hear, or participate, in these conversations?

- “We don’t need to write PAG for this future operation because we there isn’t a final CONOP.”
- “We don’t need to write a briefing card for this past operation because no reporters are asking about it.”
- “We don’t need to answer that media query because the reporter shouldn’t have asked those questions.”
- “We don’t need a graphic or video about this new initiative because words should be sufficient.”
- “We don’t want to talk about that new project because it’s stupid, or unorganized.”
- “We don’t need to work with those staff officers because nobody believes in them.”

Catch yourself, and your team, trying to talk yourselves out of doing work.

We have to do work. We have to try new shit. We have to take action. We have to find and create opportunities where they may not be obvious.

It only takes one good reason

- Dave C.



“Disregard Alarm”

This was handwritten on a sheet of printer paper, hanging on the fire alarm panel in our cafeteria, for several months over the spring and summer. We could start by asking if this “messaging strategy” was correct, clear, and clean. The intended action was defined, but of course some factors were not considered. Context: Is it broken, or just undergoing tests? Should I still disregard the alarm if I smell smoke? If I hear an alarm and know the sign’s been up several months, can I assume the alarm is fixed and someone just forgot to remove the paper? How long does it take to fix an alarm, anyway?

What about all the people who won’t look at the fire alarm panel when the alarm goes off?

None of these questions need to be answered. Just fix the damn alarm.

I, as a PAO and a leader in my organization, did not call anyone and say, “This broken alarm and handwritten sign situation tells every cafeteria visitor that our organization is lackadaisical and unprofessional. Let’s fix this.”

But I should have.

Action is the best message.

- Dave C.



Your Job

Ship or Die

There are likely plenty of things your PA shop works on. Nothing matters unless you ship it.

Everything you do must leave the office. Everything you do must have an impact on the greater organization.

Three things to think about:

1. What are you working on? Where is it going? Are your efforts aligned to impact the greater organization by actually delivering something or are you just serving yourselves and staying busy? Before you start work, plan on when and how you will ship it.
2. “Real artists ship.” Perfection is the enemy of good. Blah blah. In the artist’s eyes the product may never be ready for publication. Doesn’t matter, you don’t have the time or energy to stay on a product and make it perfect. Ship it on time.
3. Too many PAOs are buried under a review process where the Chief of Staff, Operations Officer, Janitorial staff and the pop soloists Khalid have to review their products. Guess what? We ship. We send stuff after limited review because we are the experts. You might get your boss out of whack the first few times but eventually, he’ll get used to it.

Make impact products (photos, RTQs, press releases, videos, social media posts) and ship them!

- Dave B.

The Director of Communication

It's been a long time since I read about what Public Affairs Officers are supposed to do in regulations. I do read a lot about what we should do in books about communication, corporate leadership, and a sprinkling of history. I listen to my organization to determine where it needs my team's help. I build a team recruited and organized for purpose.

On our own initiative, we do a lot that probably doesn't fall into our Public Affairs job description, along with the things that do. My bosses haven't told me to stop, so...

We'll keep doing it, because our organization needs it.

We chart the organization's message. We affect all aspects of communication, even the way our buildings and space physically look. We create and propagate our brand. We build products to inform internal and external audiences beyond the public. We work with the media to ensure our organization's reputation is protected. We advise leaders, big and small, on the way they speak to their people, welcome newcomers, and tell their stories. We provide input to our organization's operations from a communication perspective--before, during and after operations happen. We drive the organization's culture through communication. We manage the organization's reputation during crisis. We do a lot that has little to do with the public and a lot to do with communication.

What we do is much more in line with what a civilian communication executive does and less in line with what a typical government public information officer does. Take a look at the Wikipedia definitions for Public Affairs Officer and Director of Communication which do you think your organization needs more of? Commanders and organizations need Directors of Communication more than they need a narrowly defined public affairs officer.

Your name and title need not change, but your mind must. Think big. Serve at your fullest capacity. Start with small but tangible steps, not broad announcements. Execute the basics to perfection.

Be the person that takes your organization, and our profession, into the 20th century.

- Dave B.

Do Whatever You Want

You think anyone tells us what to do? They don't. No one tells us what to do in terms of public affairs, because that's my job. We take advice, feedback, input, commander's intent but we know what can and should be done. We are the experts.

If you don't know--if you are not confident in making PA decisions--then get that way.

Once you feel like you can do whatever you want, you're empowered. Because we have empowered ourselves we do great public affairs, we help drive the culture internal to our organization, we help the command communicate internally, and externally to key stakeholders, we teach our organization to communicate shit, we even design the grounds and military construction.

Here's the thing. WE empowered ourselves. We didn't ask for permission. We weren't granted more access or greater authority. We took it. So can you.

Stop making excuses.

- Dave B.

The Yes and No PAO

It's binary. There are yes PAOs and no PAOs. It must have something to do with one's nature and tendencies.

When the media approaches do you think of an opportunity or a threat?

Useful engagement yes or no?

When your organization is about to do an event do you look for innovative ways to publicize it? Is this just extra work yes or no?

When the commander asks a question do you cower or volunteer your opinion? Add to the conversation yes or no?

When the intel guy tells you no do you accept that or ask why? Challenge authority yes or no?

When there is an opportunity to improve anything in your organization do you jump at it? Seek responsibility yes or no?

It's ok to be a yes or a no PAO. Just be sure to realize that if you are a no PAO, you suck.

- Dave B.

Choosing What To Do and Doing What you Choose

Remember I said you can do whatever you want? You can but that may seem a little overwhelming.

Here's the secret sauce:

- **Write down anything and everything that you want to do.** Write down every good idea that a team member has. Write down every item the boss mentions that pertains to your team (and some items that don't). Write down every good idea that comes up while you're mowing the lawn.
- **Keep this list on a tracker.** Track the item and the next tangible step, including when/if you plan to follow up.*
- **Watch the environment.** Here's where your job comes in leader. Watch the environment for opportunity: to connect to other efforts, for cash to flow, for senior leader priorities. Be creative, you'll be surprised at how many opportunities come up. Watch for your chance to pounce.
- **Keep your team agile.** On any given day one of our team members may have a list of 57 things. They are likely working on 2-3 of those things at any time. The next week we may be working on 2 or 3 different things, sometimes without getting last week's 2 or 3 things complete. Make sure everyone knows its ok not to complete a task. Failure is an option too, sometimes we try shit and it doesn't work. If the project is worth it, try a different way, if not, scrap it.

The environment is what determines which 2 or 3 of the 57 things are. The environment is what determines our priorities. We are agile, we can switch anytime. We are quick. We are quick enough to bring an item near completion in a short time.

This isn't always comfortable. This requires agility on the doers part and close attention on the leaders part. We are not afraid to fail but failing isn't comfortable. We drive our initiatives based on the environment in order to make magic.

And magic, we make.

- Dave B.



The Time Post

As you know, time is our only limited resource. As PAOs, it's also one of the most important things we have to give this nation.

To start, some facts:

- PAOs don't command hundreds of Soldiers.
- We're not responsible for millions of dollars of equipment.
- We are not generally in the most dangerous of combat situations, although there of course are exceptions.

Instead, we have our time to offer (and offer wisely). Here are a few ways to do so:

Be available to your commander and staff. Better yet, already be where they are so nobody ever has to go looking for you. This means being when they are, and may mean saving other important work for another, later time in the day.

Speak with your people. Get to know their strengths and weaknesses. Since Public Affairs staffs are generally smaller than other staff sections, spend twice as much time getting to know your individuals. For example, in my "command" time as a captain, I led seven NCOs in a Public Affairs Detachment (whereas an infantry company, according to Wikipedia doctrine, has 80-150 members). I got to know my people very well and strived to personally contribute to each soldier's development as a public affairs professional.

Use your time to give your folks creative opportunities and constructive feedback. Create space for your folks to experiment, research and try new

things. Dave B. called this “fuck around time;” all in support of the mission, of course. Let your folks use this time, and be willing to work late, provide feedback, or help clean up any well-meaning messes that may have been incurred.

Work nights and weekends to stay up to date in real time. If there’s public affairs guidance that must be drafted, go ahead and draft it tonight, so you have something tangible to ship, or at least refine, tomorrow.

Early mornings, to read the news before anyone else, help too.

Read everything. Breaking news. Longer think pieces. Essays, books, transcripts. Listen to podcasts, while you’re at it. Use your clear understanding of public narratives to guide your organization’s contribution to these narratives.

Make calls and maintain relationships. You’re not going to be able to build and repair relationships in the midst of a communication crisis. Find the right occasions to work with your most important contacts, but don’t waste anybody’s time by networking for the sake of networking.

Blog about your career field. It’s our professional responsibility.

Needless to say, make each second of time useful. Time is an effort; and enough effort applied in the right manner will lead to effects. Offer your time generously and for impact; not wastefully.

How are you going to spend your time in 2019?

Note: I know different people in different life situations will have strong feelings on this topic. There’s a time and place for everything, and as I stated up front, time is our only limited resource. For instance, I wrote this post while sitting on my couch at 4 p.m. on a Wednesday, holding my newborn son. On balance, work longer than your peers. In the moment, do your best and use your brain.

- Dave C.

Message in a Bottle

The good thing is our audience is full of great PA people who want to do more, and more and more for their organizations. They want to do more for their organizations because they want to do more for America. Key the music.

We want to do more as well. In a previous post, we said “you can do whatever you want” in a sequel, we spelled out how. by talking about a ham. Here’s the skinny:

Cast bottles. When I was a kid (and littering was cool I guess) I used to put messages in bottles, seal them up and throw them in the water hoping someday someone would find it. Shit, I’d be happy if I found it later the same day. You want to get shit done? Throw a bunch of bottles out to sea, some will return some will make it to distant shores. Have ideas. Lots of shit won’t work, much of it will fail. Just like the bottles I threw in the ocean will never return. It’s the magic of having the idea and launching it, it’s the excitement in coming up with something new and different which drives you and your team to be better.

The good news some of your ideas will succeed. Some will become breakthrough. Many will inform other ideas and morph to become reality.

You can sit back and wait for someone to tell you what to do or you can go after things which stoke your passion. Make this truth there is no risk to failure. Throw some bottles and see what happens.

Do it.

- Dave B.

A Pitch for Pitches

There are plenty of things you and your team want to do, there are plenty of things you need to do it. You need to have a pitch ready for each.

This is quick way to organize your thoughts:

- **Headline.** Why are you talking?
- **Background.** Setup, just enough for your audience to understand. Facts This is your content.
- **Conclusion.** What's in it for the audience? If you do this, you will get this. That's your pitch.

Prepare all your wants and needs into a pitch like this and be ready to tell anyone and everyone, anytime.

I sling pitches at chow. I'll pitch while walking to a meeting. It's great to run into the boss, I have a pitch ready. You should see me pitch from the urinal.

I don't sell. I don't try to convince. I just represent my team by having organized thoughts and communicating them efficiently.

Took me a while to figure out how useful this is and how much you can achieve. You'll find your bosses and comrades will appreciate you always have something useful to say. Don't waste time with decision makers exchanging useless pleasantries.

Don't waste time, help your organization by properly representing their needs at every opportunity.

- Dave B.

Part of Your Job

- Working with people is part of your job.
- Being likable is part of your job.
- The Principles of Information are part of your job.
- Knowing how to use and maintain your weapon is part of your job.
- Reading the news is part of your job.
- Providing context to the media is part of your job ... whether or not you're asked to.
- Understanding the training plan or CONOP is part of your job.
- Giving bad news early is part of your job.
- Validating your team's capabilities is part of your job.
- Journalism ethics is part of your job.
- Your organization's Command Brief is part of your job.
- Having a functioning network account is part of your job.
- Watching DOD press conferences is part of your job.
- Mentoring others is part of your job.
- Knowing a reporter's agenda is part of your job.
- Ceremony programs are part of your job.
- Travel is part of your job.
- Understanding social media is part of your job.
- Being good to and present with your family is part of your job.
- Sharing information with non-PAOs is part of your job.
- Ghost-writing columns for the FRG newsletter is part of your job.
- Conflict is part of your job.
- Copy editing is part of your job.
- Picking up the phone is part of your job.
- Knowing the status of that investigation is part of your job.
- Good book recommendations are part of your job.
- Sleeping in a tent is part of your job.
- Checking in with your subordinate PAOs is part of your job.
- Understanding strategic guidance and policy is part of your job.
- Empathy is part of your job.
- Believe it or not, community relations is part of your job.
- Helping organization members with non-military communication challenges is part of your job.
- Writing speeches is part of your job.
- Helping leaders who have trouble communicating is part of your job.
- Looking the part is part of your job.
- Picking up trash is part of your job.
- Saying "yes" is part of your job.
- is part of your job.

- Dave C.

You're In or You're Out

- You can't ask a reporter to hold a story if you're not willing to have a conversation about context.
- You can't put your commander on camera if you're not going to coach them.
- You can't control the narrative if you don't attach a draft.
- You can't control the branding if you don't redesign the gym or the DFAC. You can't be a spokesman for a military organization if you're a fat slob.
- You can't call yourself a proud, professional organization if you don't take out the trash.
- You can't invite yourself to the commander's most important meetings if you're aren't joining him or her on ruck marches or inconvenient TDYs.
- You can't have a seat in the JOC if you don't take responsibility for a functioning workstation.
- You can't have a seat in the JOC if you don't understand the CONOP.
- You can't have a seat in the JOC if you're aimlessly surfing Twitter.
- You can't have a seat in the JOC if you're not going to join in the conversation.
- You can't have a seat in the JOC if you're going to leave it empty.
- You can't broadcast your importance to the team if you're going to ignore phone calls on Friday night.
- You can't add value if you aren't going to figure out what your commander values.
- You can't be a leader if you aren't willing to lead.

- Dave C.

Because You Have To

My kid had a school presentation.

I helped her get started. "Why are you doing this presentation?" I asked. "Because I have to," she answered like a tween.

"Yeah, but why. Why did you pick this topic and what do you want your audience to take away?"

As a PA person, do you communicate because you have to or because you want your audience to know something, to understand, or to feel a certain way?

If you're communicating because you have to, consider not communicating.

- Dave B.

If I Told You, I'd Have to Kill You

Maybe it's not as serious as the title.

The question is, as the public communicator, do you want to know? Do you need to know about the secret plan to get rid of Hans Landa or whatever secret plan your organization has embarked on? What about that nasty investigation ... you want to know about that?

If you don't know, it's easy to tell reporters, "I have no idea."

If you don't know, it's hard to give your boss and the team the advice they need.

If you do know, and reporters call about your secret plan, what will you say? What will you do? They could even be asking you about something classified! Yikes!

Your choice. The answer is environment based, conditions dependent but for the most part: you need to know.

And if some jabrone on the staff decides for you, because he doesn't think you need to know, go around him and find out anyway.

A well-informed public affairs officer is a good one. When you are informed, you can anticipate queries and plan a response. When you are informed you can advise the boss on the right direction to take.

Sounds obvious? A lot of shit we write here is.

Go and do likewise.

- Dave B.

Short, Easy, Nothing Big

The other day I passed a colleague in the hallway, and asked how his last meeting had gone. His report: "It was short. Easy. Nothing big."

I nodded, said "cool" and continued on with my day. Sounded like a complete engagement to me. He knocked it out and moved on to the next one.

Later on it hit me: Short? Easy? Nothing big? Are those the adjectives I value in my work?

Friends, this is not where we want to be!

Time is our only limited resource: let's spend it having effective discussions, building shared understanding and achieving tangible results.

Let's do something every day to move our organizations forward.

Let's avoid situations where our only objective is to get through the engagement. We have so much more to offer our teams!

Let's save our "if only"s and complaints about "them" for our fish.

We've got a world to change.

- Dave B.



Be Where Your People Are

Drinking a beer with my father-in-law, he mentioned one of his North Carolina-based human resources employees stopped in “to see” one of the company’s distribution centers in Texas while on vacation nearby.

Baller move. Go to and do work where your people are.

If you’re wasting away in your office, avoiding the great shit your troops are doing every day, you’re missing an opportunity.

Do PT. Go out in the field. Sweat.

Hell, sit in the JOC. Sit through an all-nighter with the battle staff, absorb the energy and the monotony.

Build relationships.

At least, bring your public affairs shit with you and do your job in the field, surrounded by motivated and interesting people. (As long as you’re not a distraction, or a staff-guy clown demanding special treatment).

At best, put your public affairs shit away and enjoy being in the Army. Take the initiative to be where your people are. A first-hand understanding of your organization and its people will lead to productive conversations, and added credibility, with your organization’s soldiers, commanders, and senior NCOs.

- Dave C.



The SME of SMEs

When I was a second lieutenant working garrison PA ops at an Air Force wing in the Midwest, I did a lot of tours. Like a lot. I was a pro at talking through a mic on a moving bus pointing things out, giving history and even telling a few jokes. While it was not what I thought my career in the military would be like when I joined, I found the importance in this thing we call community relations. I got to spend my work days showing and telling ROTC cadets and local leaders why the Air Force is so awesome! How the Air Force community is part of their community and how we want them to be a part of ours.

During these tours, I would get asked by my guests, and on occasion other officers, “Why Public Affairs?” Why? Because of this exactly. I get to meet people, I get to learn about what everyone else does and communicate it to those who need to know.

As the PAO, you need to know a little bit of everything. It’s your job to share what your organization does with the local community, military leaders, congress and whoever else your target audience might be. In order to do that, you need to understand all aspects of your unit’s mission. Sounds like a lot to know, right? Hint: There is always someone out there who knows about what you need to know. You are a communicator, you learned how to ask questions in DINFOS. Apply this to daily ops. Get to know someone in every department. Have a buddy who goes to that meeting you can’t because you are a shop of one.

Be the SME of SMEs and get work done.

- Carly C.

Put Down the Camera

A long time ago in a galaxy far away, GEN Casey came to visit my Brigade. I was the Brigade PAO. My photog had to pick up his kids or something; he couldn't take the photos.

I'd never met Casey. My Brigade commander greeted him as he arrived. I shot the weak, basic photo of them shaking hands. Casey looked over at me, "don't you have anything better to do, Major?"

I've never taken another public affairs photo.

It's dumb. As an officer, you don't have any real photog training. You have a reputation to uphold. You are representing public affairs officers to your entire organization. You have to show them what you actually do, and it's not taking photos. If you have the time to sit out in front of your headquarters waiting for some DV to arrive, you gotta keep reading this blog and figure out what your job is.

As a Captain or a Major in the infantry, if you're shooting, shit has gone bad. If you're taking pictures, it better be 'cause there's a zombie attack or some shit.

- Dave B.

Put Down The Camera: A Retort

Here's the thesis of a great post that I was considering, "PAOs should only take pictures when appropriate."

That's boring. "Of course. Yeah. Whatever," we might say. We'd likely say nothing at all.

A mentor once told me, "If there is a middle ground, you don't find it on the internet."

We find truth and clarity through discourse and argument.

Should Brigade PAOs take photos? Sure, I guess, when they have to. Should Brigade PAOs think awfully hard about being labeled as the commander's photographer vice the command's communication strategists? Fuck yes they should.

In the 189 or so comments that followed the camera post in the cesspool we call Facebook there were some great points, most of them arguing against the black/white interpretation of this post. Well said and thanks for getting us (the community) closer to some truth.

Keep reading, thinking and disagreeing.

- Dave B.

Get Out of the Spotlight

If there is an opportunity to highlight someone; some shit on the Today Show, a radio shout-out, a personal profile or whatever ... don't take it for yourself. Don't give it to one of the PA folks on your team. Find some Soldier, find some kid from the front line of what your organization does and highlight him or her.

Our team got together on a few examples:

- Is there an opportunity to be in the picture when the Commander-in-Chief gives a speech on your installation? STOP
- Did the local sports team ask to publicly recognize a soldier at an upcoming game and you really like the team? STOP.
- Is the local television station looking to do a warm and fuzzy feature on family sacrifices as your unit prepares to deploy, and you know your spouse has done so much?
- Just get a call from the Today Show offering to do an on-air makeover for someone in uniform and you could use some blush?
- Does the local newspaper want to do a friendly profile of a rising officer? This would make you look good.
- Have you just received free tickets to the annual Christmas concert from your local radio station? That's be fun, right?

These are all excellent opportunities to highlight young soldiers who have earned recognition for behavior which should be emulated to make your organization stronger.

They are not chances for the PAO to thrust him or herself into the limelight.

- Dave B.

Public Affairs

Blame “Them” or Fix It

Time to wake up and realize what’s going on. Public affairs professionals, we are not in a good place. Department of Defense communication is holistically in bad shape. Our inability to do our jobs will have adverse effects on our country. Blame “them” or fix this.

Who is “them”? Pick your poison: it’s whoever you usually blame for your own problems, lack of access and lackluster reputation. If you’re the kind of professional who’s wrapped up in outsourcing your issues, then you have a “them” and you are not seeking or taking responsibility.

The Air Force is under a (likely misunderstood) gag order. The Army and Marine Corps Public Affairs branches are led by non-public affairs people. Commanders everywhere have little understanding of what we do and don’t feel comfortable supporting us doing it.

Blame “them” or fix this.

I’ve been in enough senior public affairs meetings and talked with enough public affairs people to know our field likes to blame “them.”

We’ve all heard it: “It’s clearly not our fault.” “These decisions aren’t made with our input.” “Our commander’s don’t give us the right support.” “Our branch leaders have pure good intentions but lack the depth of experience and longevity to fix us.” “They don’t allow us a seat at the table.” “We are over-supervised despite our position as delineated in joint and service doctrine.” “They don’t understand.”

If only “they” understood. Stop blaming “them.”

A public affairs mentor addressed this issue to a group of young professionals. His advice: “Do a good job.” He said you could pull out the doctrine, but that doesn’t help. You could complain (and we do), but that won’t fix things. He told us that if you do great work, you will get the proper level of supervision and influence your organization. If you are clearly the expert, you will be treated like one.

It’s amazing what happens when you focus on the mission.

I’m telling you from my personal experience and from watching others, doing your job well works. I’ve had bosses that don’t like or support public affairs (or me) ... but they eventually let me do my job. I’ve taken over for public affairs officers who were over-supervised and eventually relieved ... after enough great work I returned public affairs to a position of greatness. I could blame “them” because it was “their” fault but it doesn’t matter, it’s up to me (and you) to fix it.

Look around. In this era of fake news, decreased transparency and public risk aversion your profession is at stake. The public affairs apparatus is important to our nation and democracy. Blame “them” or fix it.

- Dave B.

“Public Affairsy”

“This document is so Public Affairsy! ... No, no, I don’t mean any offense. It just doesn’t help me!”

A respected colleague’s exclamation, in the JOC, while researching information they need to protect America.

Friends, our career field is associated with unhelpful information. Professionals assume Public Affairs outlets will not provide helpful information.

Professionals assume unhelpful information came from Public Affairs outlets.

This is not where we want to be! More importantly, this is not where our nation needs us to be.

If we’re communicating on behalf of our military and nation, we’d better be doing so to spark tangible action, or at least understanding.

When you communicate, completely know the action or understanding you’re driving.

We write often about starting with “Why?” While the ultimate “why?” involves our actions to defend America, there are other things to consider.

- Why did our audience members put themselves in a position to receive this information?
- What’s our audience’s agenda, and can we support it?
- How is each word going to enable action, or understanding?
- Where is the tangible, unique and valuable information?
- How did we make it easy to find and digest?

Answer these questions to share useful information, and maybe we can rewrite the definition of “Public Affairsy.”

- Dave C.

We Write History

It struck me one time when I was working with a journalist on correcting a story he had gotten wrong. He was simply misinformed by trusted and vetted sources. The facts were off. The story was now stale. In fact, a few weeks old. I was late. I cared about making sure it was correct but I asked him, “why do you care about getting this so exactly right anymore?”

He told me his story was “the record.” He’s right.

When you provide media comment, access to your organization or event, you are writing history. If you read books based on historic events, you will see that much of the author’s references are media reports.

As public communicators, you and your team should take pride in what you do not only because the free press is foundational to democracy but because you help write history.

No matter how small the event for the rest of forever, when anyone wants to look back and learn about ‘what happened’ it’ll be your work that helps explain it.

Be proud, remind your team of the important work we do. We write history.

-Dave B.

Movin' Up the Chain: Dos and Don'ts

Congrats! You're getting promoted, moving up the chain, maybe taking on a Public Affairs assignment at the Division or Corps staff (or higher). Sure, you're further away from the action and dealing with some additional staff bureaucracy, but you're also dealing in strategic releases for more substantial audiences. To top it off, you're in a weird position where you've got to drive action and clear understanding, by working with and through a team of empowered PAOs in your subordinate units.

I've seen great and bad Public Affairs staff work as a PAD Commander, BCT PAO, and PA staff officer at 2-, 3 and 4-star commands. Here's what I've learned lower-level PAOs need from their higher headquarters' PA Director (and staff).

Do: Reinforce Strong, Simple Themes and Messages.

The higher up you go, the shorter and simpler you have to be with your messages. If your headquarters lists the Cheesecake Factory menu's worth of key themes and messages, your subordinate PAOs may never learn to integrate the right ones at the right times. Have two, maybe three, key messaging campaigns and teach PAOs to forever and ever hammer those forever lines.

Don't: Treat Subordinate PAOs Like They Work For You.

You have a staff, and the subordinate PAOs ain't it. Walk a fine line of coaching them and partnering with them. No need to enter a one-sided, prescriptive relationship. At the end of the day, they work for their own commander ... who just happens to work for your commander.

Do: Share the Commander's Guidance.

Information is money, and you're driving the information bus. Arm subordinate PAOs with the commander's latest guidance, or what the boss is reading today. They're probably not getting that from their own leaders, and in some cases could actually be providing it for their own leaders.

Don't: Demand Constant Updates Without Adding Value.

No one likes the higher headquarters who creates additional reporting requirements, or meetings, just to "check in" or "maintain awareness" without making anyone's job easier. Respect the other PAOs' time, but when you do engage, provide new information and additional resources to support their efforts. If you don't know what a subordinate PAO has been doing lately, a friendly phone call or visit will achieve more clarity than a new recurring meeting.

Do: Find and Fix Inconsistencies.

Are first and second brigades using different words to describe the same mission? Is third brigade refusing to release information the others are freely giving? Consistency is almost as important as context. Break the ties that

your subordinate units may not be aware of; and make sure you're not breaking the same rule against your sister headquarters.

Don't: Outsource Work Your Staff Could Do.

C'mon, give me a break.

Do: Ask the Right Questions.

It happens to all of us: PAOs spend their time with leaders and staffers who speak the same language, all the time. Widen the aperture for your subordinate PAOs by productively exploring the words they write, the way they coordinate with their staff, and way their operations are discussed outside their silos.

Do: Fact Check.

Goes along with asking the right questions. Yes, you ought to trust your subordinate PAOs, but you're in a position to make sure their recommended Public Affairs guidance and releases match the reports their unit is sending your G-3 and G-2. Find discrepancies and root out the source, or else reporters will later.

Don't: Be the HHC/HHBN PAO.

Think about plans and operations at the same level as your commander. If subordinate PAOs only hear about your coverage of that cake-cutting ceremony, you're an HHC PAO.

Do: Set Standards.

What does your organization's best public affairs work look like? If you don't have examples and standards, build them alongside your subordinate PAOs. Apply those templates and checklists across the organization, and break them out before major events.

Don't: Copy Edit.

Who gives a shit? This is an important difference from "Set Standards" above ... either something they send you doesn't meet those standards and gets sent back for another look, or it does meet those standards and your team takes it from there.

Do: Build Bridges and Break Down Walls.

Does the subordinate commander know and trust their own PAO? Are all the PAOs speaking with each other? Are you introducing them to senior PAOs in the Pentagon, and journalists they ought to know? You can and should be a connector.

Challenge: I've learned these lessons as an officer and civilian. Senior NCOs, what's your perspective? What do you have to change or add?

- Dave C.



Community Relations: Not Just for Suckas

PA Doctrine spells out several good reasons for doing community relations. You're not going to find doctrine on MaxDis friends. Let's talk about experience.

Helping to define and protect your organization's reputation is potentially the most important thing you do as a PAO. Organizational reputation gets you resources, the freedom to operate and the support you need to do it. Community relations is a key part of protecting your organization's rep.

You know the foolish cartoon, PAO Break Glass in Case of Emergency? That couldn't be more wrong. You want to survive an emergency? You have to act now so your organization's reputation can survive a grievous public event. Your organization will definitely screw something up, we all do. You have to invest now to be ready.

When something horrible happens. The community will support you based on their knowledge and interaction with you. Community relations builds that knowledge.

A few years ago the organization I was a part of was blamed for the death of a local kid. The Special Forces dive school in Key West has a decompression chamber which is set up to treat divers effected by 'the bends.' A kid, on vacation with his dad, died due to this sort of dive injury. Some people in the community, for whatever reason, alleged our school refused emergency lifesaving treatment.

Key West is a small place and the school depends on the community to operate. Lack of community support could have been a severe problem for the school.

Luckily, the staff at the school was smart (ahead of time). The school doc had years of partnership with the local hospital. Community leaders were invited to all of their major events. The cadre had become a large part of the community and culture. We had had the pleasure of drinking beers on several occasions with the local reporter who covered the small military beat. Needless to say, in this instance, the entire community condemned our accusers. Through social media, comments on articles and public discussion the community came directly to the support of our school.

Most of us don't work in Key West. Most of the time you are part of a larger community with multiple organizations. Do your part, and when you do make sure they know who you are. Your organization's name will be in the newspaper someday for some terrible reason.

If you think Target and Walmart do community events out of the goodness of their hearts or even for advertising you're wrong. Good organizations invest and do community relations in order to protect their reputations when crisis strikes. And crisis will strike.

One more thing: community relations is good for morale (this actually is in doctrine). Doing things with the community makes members of your organizations feel good and builds better teams.

- Dave B.



Who's our next General Officer PAO?

When I was a second lieutenant attending the Public Affairs Qualification Course almost a decade ago, I asked the Army's Chief of Public Affairs what I needed to do in my career to become a two-star general leading our Public Affairs community, like him. His answer: "Sometimes God has a plan for you, and sometimes the Army has a plan for you, and sometimes those plans don't align." It was a hell of a non-answer, but I received the message loud and clear.

Years later, I was told the reason Army Public Affairs is led by a general officer with no Public Affairs background is because they bring three things to the table that PAOs cannot: Context, Contacts, and Credibility.

- **Context:** Understanding of what it means to be a senior leader in the U.S. Army.
- **Contacts:** Relationships with other senior leaders in the U.S. Army.
- **Credibility:** ... and trust amongst those senior leaders.

(This post is in no way meant to bash our Chief of Public Affairs, whom I've never met and do not work with.)

Army Public Affairs Officer Corps: We have a problem if the Army's general officers don't believe you bring Context, Contacts and Credibility to the table. After all, our NCO and Civilian senior leaders at OCPA both came from our career fields, and use their experience and expertise to lead our colleagues.

It seems to me we want a General Officer who shares the same public affairs experience we do. We want a General Officer who knows our people

as well as we do. In order to transform the Army Public Affairs Branch into what our nation needs of us, we want a General Officer who wields past and present longevity.

How can our officers get there? First and foremost, re-read the definitions listed above ... do you notice a trend? I don't claim to know the secret sauce to breaking into the General Office circle, but I'm guessing there's some merit to bolstering your internal credentials. While you're at it, consider the ways your experience helps you expand on those original definitions:

Context.

Understand what it means to be a senior leader in the U.S. Army. AND know the Army's communication challenges, the history and evolution of our operational messages, and what has and hasn't worked. Nobody knows the media environment better than you. Know the administrative, manning and equipping strengths and weaknesses within our career field, and have a track record of addressing them.

Contacts.

Have relationships with other senior U.S. Army leaders. AND know influential reporters and third-party communicators, where they can help and what makes them tick. Understand and work with reporters' focus areas, credibility and biases. Networking is stupid, but being known as an aware, reliable, responsive and creative leader is smart. Strong relationships help you do your job and support America's protection. Be likable and have unique and productive things to say. Don't burn relationships and don't inject drama.

Credibility.

Build trust amongst U.S. Army senior leaders. AND be your organization's best officer ... not just its best Public Affairs Officer. Make informed and accurate predictions about media trends, and have insight that leads to tangible changes in your organization's media strategy. Think on a higher, strategic plane. Solve problems, put in the MDMP time, and understand and act on your organization's mission. Don't be a sideshow, don't spend your life on social media, and don't subordinate yourself to other staff members. If you lack the understanding and skill to at least be a Deputy G3 in your organization, you're behind the curve.

Even if God's plan and the Army's plan for you ultimately don't put a star on your chest, are you doing everything you can to display our officer corps' Context, Contacts and Credibility?

- Dave C.

Your Commander

You and Your Commander

No one gets between me and the commander.

Not the Aide, XO, Secretary, Chief of Staff ... no one. My relationship with the commander is too important to be filtered. He believes that, so should you and everyone else.

Why? The PAO has a strategically important job that requires the commander's direct knowledge, judgement and direction. Your actions often require him to take personal risk. Your job is too important to confuse and delay through bureaucracy.

So what do you do when there are gatekeepers; when the commander ignorantly says, 'I want you to report to the Chief, he will keep me informed.'

- **Step 1:** Kick ass. You have to do magnificent work. You have to BE the expert. If you're not now, read more, watch people, meet with good communicators and learn.
- **Step 2:** Provide the commander critical feedback. Every time he communicates provide smart, calculated and critical feedback.
- **Step 3:** Be a part of the team. Always contribute. Always staff. Sit at the table (even if you're not invited) and make useful, thoughtful comments. The only way you can genuinely do this is by knowing whats going on in your organization.
- **Step 4:** Just do it. When you need to talk to your commander, talk to them. Copy them on e-mails, bring them into YOUR fold.

As a young Major, I could see the commander's bathroom from my desk. When I needed to talk to the boss, I would stand near the door so when he left I could 'run into him' in the hallway. I was efficient and smart in what I had to say, I got decisions then walked away. Always leaving him wanting more. He started seeking me out.

My commander once asked me to stay longer at my current assignment. I said yes contingent on the agreement that I was given uninhibited, all access to him whenever I needed it. He was surprised at my audacity but agreed. I only used this when I needed to.

The SECDEF travels with his primary communicator. I point this out at every opportunity.

When one of my 3 stars first took command, he held an all-hands talk with unit members. I emailed him a few minutes after he got back and told him, "I had a few things he could work on that will make us better next time." He called me up to his office within minutes, I gave him a scathing review with useful tips to improve. He tried to never talk again without talking to me first.

Be great. Be bold. Demand a position in the organization by being valuable.

- Dave B.



Commanders Have Mission Statements

Commanders have mission statements.

Staff professionals apply skills and tools to their commander's mission statement.

Several years ago, the nine-person Public Affairs team to which I was the deputy sat down for a series of meetings to determine our internal team's mission and vision. For hours we debated key words, goals and communication philosophies because we wanted to codify our identity.

Boy, I think we were on the wrong track.

Our organization's mission statement was our mission statement. We just needed to have a frank conversation about the skills and tools we had or could obtain to support that mission.

It's not about you, it's not about your internal team, and it's not about your public affairs interests or beliefs.

Focus on mission. Always.

- Dave C.

Wake up, You're Now on Personal Staff

Congratulations. You are now on the commander's personal staff, at least according to the Army. Actually, the PAO has always been on personal staff. Start acting like it.

You are in the company of giants, the surgeon, the SJA and ... probably some other important people.

When was the last time you heard the Chief of Staff tell the surgeon how to do medical shit? Does the J3/S3 tell the SJA how to understand and practice law? Nope, because they are respected experts.

You should be a respected expert in communication.

First step, act like one. Talk directly to your commander. Advise him with firm recommendations. Ask educated questions to understand his intent. Sit at the table, don't be scared.

Second, be an expert. Read a lot about communication. Read this blog. Know and deeply understand the media environment; personally get to know the reporters that cover your beat. Most PAOs have the opportunity to attend graduate or follow on education do it.

Third, don't suck. Look in the mirror. If you suck, fix it. Your whole organization is depending on you to be good. Your community needs you to be good. Your organization's families, need to be supported by a good communicator. Depending on where you work, the nation may be depending on you to be good. You know how to be good. If you don't, stay tuned to MaxDisclosure. The Chaplain is also on personal staff. I don't recommend you act like the Chaplain.

Get to work.

- Dave B.



Speak for the Commander

Several years ago as a young PAO, I had some very specific and wild thoughts on how our higher headquarters should respond to a reporter's query. I spouted off my big plans to our higher headquarters' PAO, a lieutenant colonel, who simply responded, "If that's really what your commander wants to do, we'll look into it."

Of course, I had to backtrack. I had no idea where the commander stood on this issue or generally how he felt about adopting a new and aggressive approach to media relations. It was an important lesson to learn early: always know you're speaking for your commander.

When acting in an official capacity and discussing organizational issues, you've got to put many of your personal opinions about Public Affairs approaches and postures to the side. You're the commander's communications advisor and personal spokesperson. This means, by default, the things you say represent the commander's position. Be aware of this, and don't inadvertently misrepresent their stance on an important issue.

The balance here is knowing and understanding your commander's vision so well that you can speak for them, and like them, without always checking with them.

With the Media.

Know you are exactly in line with what the commander wants and expects. In your command's briefings, you only write down the ops or intel information that you need to take action on. Likewise, reporters are listening to all our fluff to find those one or two newsworthy nuggets. Align those

with your commander's communications plan. The good news here: I haven't worked with a U.S. military commander who didn't prioritize (1) truth and the organization's credibility, and (2) the idea that more background and context, told with care and precision, helps the organization's mission.

With other PAOs.

Remember, the stakes are high. You speak for a military commander, that carries a lot of weight. Make sure you are wielding that weight and power along the commander's intent. Your higher headquarters PAO may ask you, "Is that what your commander said?" Watch out for those times you're talking about your vision, but you're not sure its in line with the boss. Dangerous business.

Just like you, they are their commander's communications advisor. Your higher headquarters' commander cares about what your commander wants to do, and will factor those recommendations into their decision making. Likewise, your higher headquarters PAO will take your recommendations to their leaders as official positions.

Within your organization's staff.

People on your team, even other staff primaries, know you're on the boss's personal staff and will come to you to get a sense of the commander's thoughts and priorities. When the ops or intel staff asked me "Do you think we'll still be doing this mission a month from now?" they really didn't care what I, one of the junior dudes on the staff, thought. They did care what I knew as the commander's communications advisor who could have talked to him about it. Aware of this, I said, "Here's what the commander has said about it ..." Problem solved, and our staff leaders were able to stay consistent with the party line, rather than walk away from a useless conversation about some jerk PAO captain's opinions.

The best thing you can do is take as much access as you can get to your commander's words. Listen to him or her speak during meetings, discussions and presentations. Get CCed on the e-mails they send to senior leaders and subordinates alike. Travel with the commander when you can. Talk to them about important issues and their interpretation in the media, to learn where they stand. And since you're their communications advisor, give them feedback on how to further drive their messages.

When you strike the balance, the conversation should go like this, "Is that what your commander said to do?"

"No, but if I asked him that's what they would say."

Others are talking to you because of the leader and organization you represent. Know their agenda, and your own.

- Dave C.

Roll Like a Boss with the Boss

One of the great things about public affairs is you get to define what you do and how. The only truly limited resource we have is time. Where are you going to spend yours?

One of the decisions you will have to make is how much time to spend physically with and working for your commander.

Some PAOs will serve as the HHC PAO, some will spend their time with their teams, some will be on Facebook, some with the media, some in the JOC and some will roll deep with their commanders. The best find the right mix (minus Facebook) for the environment they are in.

You have to make deliberate decisions about how you spend your time. You have to balance and keep organizationally important communication endeavors on track.

All this said, to get things done, you must spend time with the boss.

- **The boss drives the organization's agenda and culture.** Obvious, yes but you have to hear and understand where the boss is going to support it.
- **Being with the boss gives you organizational wasta.** As an often junior ranking member of the staff, other staffers and your first line supervisor needs to understand who you really work for. When you need resources and support you are more likely to get it when people know you're part of the boss's team.
- **The boss needs to learn.** You will find a great deal of opportunity to teach your boss about communication when you roll with him. He (or she) will continue to get promoted, make sure you're doing your part to build a future leader.
- **The boss makes decisions which have public impact.** You not only need to make him aware of the potential impacts but you also have to prepare for them.

For some, easier said than done. You're going to have to convince your commander you add value.

Just because you can roll like a boss with the boss doesn't mean you should, all the time. I've been in situation where the aide automatically adds me to the manifest when the boss is travelling. Not so fast buddy, where are we going and why? What can I do for our organization by travelling? Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. What a great message you send by removing yourself from the boss's manifest, Always Be Messaging, players.

Make deliberate and hard decisions about where to spend your time and always consider spending time with the boss at the top of your list.

- Dave B.



Leaders Always Talk About Taking Out the Trash

I used to roll my eyes when I heard yet another U.S. Army senior commander or general go on about the importance of taking out the trash. "Oh boy," I'd think, "here we go again. Doesn't this person have anything strategic to think about?"

Here's the thing: I've heard it again, and again. Across commands and components, top leaders whom I respect have emphasized the fact that trash cans in JOCs, offices and common areas are overflowing and disgusting and anyone and everyone has a responsibility to take out the trash.

Leaders are always going to talk about taking out the trash ... and now, I am too.

Why?

- It's a clear and demonstrable reflection of people failing to pay attention to detail, and take pride in their organization.
- It shows a team's unwillingness to do the menial work. You don't want a culture where people think they're above or too busy for simple tasks.
- It's one of the first things your guests and new members will notice when they walk in the door.
- Barring injuries and medical conditions, literally anybody can do it. It is a rank-, branch- or position-immaterial task that takes a little energy and even less humility.

Yes, everyone should be focused on mission. Operations. Strategy. While you're at it, take out the damn trash.

- Dave C.

A Letter to a New Brigade Commander

Comrade,

A wise man once told me, “Making dinner every night doesn’t make you a chef.” As the saying goes, reading the newspaper doesn’t make you a PAO.

That being said, your PAO likely doesn’t have a master’s degree in communication or years of experience doing public relations.

They have had the benefit of a 60ish day course in this curriculum. If you’re manned correctly, you have an NCO. He or she could be a recluse with little or no experience in PA either.

But don’t worry, the stakes are high.

You will still be successful, this isn’t rocket science. It’s a business of creativity and passion.

Here is the simple paradigm for success: make news. Seems counter-intuitive to commanders who want to stay out of the papers and “just do their jobs.” Make news as much as possible.

Expect your PA team to work hard to make news and you will cushion the information environment, develop the right relationships, gain confidence and sharpen skills.

If you have your team stay active on social media, you will have a bigger and more receptive audience when you have something vitally important to say.

If you invite the local media to an event and get them what they need to be successful, you will lean on the same relationship when times are tough.

The old PA mantra, “break glass in case of emergency” is dead and has been proven wrong over and over again. Practice proactive public affairs in everything you do, this will ready you for any disaster.

To be successful, your PA team needs direct access to you. PA is important enough to your command that you can afford another direct report. In my overwhelming experience a supervisory Chief of Staff is counterproductive. As far as your public persona goes, you’ll be just fine. If you’re reserved, be reserved when you engage to your audiences. If you’re outgoing, be outgoing.

Always be calculated, never speak publicly off the cuff.

If your PAO sucks, fire him. There are plenty of Infantryman who can do this job as well.

Have fun.

- Dave B.



Commanders, You Don’t Need a Shit PAO

Who is the organization’s PAO?

- a. A PAQC graduate.
- b. The person given the assignment by Branch.
- c. The dude sitting in the PAO office.
- d. He or she who has admin rights to the organization’s Facebook page.
- e. Whoever the commander trusts with their communication program.

Commanders: If you don’t trust your assigned 46A with your communications program, then what are you keeping them around for? If your PAO sucks, fire them. We know commanders only make decisions like this after guidance and development, on both ends, have failed. Replace your PAO if branch lets you, but even if you can’t, it’s not worth having someone you aren’t going to use.

You’ve got a mission, and in some way you’ll find someone you can trust to communicate for you and your organization.

If commanders at all levels continue to accept shit PAOs, the military will continue to train and validate them in the same manner.

PAQC Graduates: If you aren’t option “e” above, you aren’t a PAO, you ought to lose your job, and the fault is yours.

MaxDisclosure has never, necessarily, been a blog for you. It’s a blog for PAOs; for the people who want to be trusted with their commander’s communication program.

- Dave C.

Your Staff

Educating your Fellow Staff Officers

How often do you hear PAOs say, “If only I had more people,” “if only they would invite me to the meeting,” “if only they wouldn’t think about public affairs until the last minute?”

News flash, you won’t get more people, you have to invite yourself to meetings, and if your planners and operators don’t know about PA, they won’t think about it until the last minute. Luckily, there is a way to fix this. It’s called educating your fellow staff officers.

Yes, we are often a small shop. A shop of one in many cases, and when it rains for a PAO, it pours. You can’t be everywhere at once. You can’t track everything all the time, but saying “if only” is not going to solve anything.

As PAOs, we are communicators. Communicate your mission and needs over a cup of coffee with your fellow staff officers: the ops crew, your intel nerds, the planners, the Commander’s exec and RTOs. Educate them on the PAO mission. Get them excited as to why public affairs needs to be involved. It is your job, PAO, to make sure their hard work gets seen by to Congress, the Secretary of Defense, the President and the public. Make yourself valuable to the team, and everything else will come together.

- Carly C.

Are You Aligned?

We approve our responses to query.

We approve our public affairs guidance.

We approve statements.

We approve Tweets, and we would approve Facebook posts but we don't post on Facebook cause it's a cesspool.

We approve RTQ.

Get the picture? We approve our own stuff, we don't wait for the J3 or the Chief of Staff or even the commander ... unless we determine it necessary for the commander to look at something before it goes out. Sometimes we make the call to have a J2 review our stuff, often we get a look from the JAG, sometimes a subject matter expert helps. But for the most part, we have the ability to approve and release information ourselves because we are the experts and, most importantly, we are aligned. We are fast, accurate and aligned.

Being aligned means you know what's going on in your organization, you know what your commander wants and you understand the overall intent.

Here is how you get (and stay) aligned:

- **Listen:** Good commanders talk. Listen and take notes. Send these notes around, to your staff and others. Become the commander's megaphone.
- **Be Present:** Just by attending events (meetings, training events, operations briefs, stupid holiday things) you'll learn and gain alignment.
- **Talk to your boss:** Instead of putting a press release in front of him for approval. Before the press release ask, "Sir, what direction do you want to take here, this is what I'm thinking..." Have a conversation rather than discussing the grammar in a factory release.

To be aligned your team, the staff and the commander need to trust you and they will trust you if you do good work. So do good work.

We write a lot about being a responsible, useful, independent public affairs officer because it's possibly the most important tenet in the teachings of MaxDis. Strive for the above and accept nothing less.

- Dave B.

Killing HIPPOs

HIPPO: "Highest Paid Person's Opinion"

GEN Thomas, the Commander of Special Operations Command, recently gave a talk on cyber where he referred to the HIPPO and described the HIPPO as, "the most senior or highest person opining or making decisions where they are the least technically competent."

Sound familiar, PAO?

This happens all the time right? This happens, especially in great organizations where we crowd source solutions and take in multiple opinions. If there is a strategic decision to make, centered around a communication issue, you will get a lot of opinions and direction. You will always hear from the loudest person in the room and you will hear from the HIPPO.

My favorite saying about this, "Eating dinner every night doesn't make you a chef anymore than reading the news makes you a PAO."

Here are your tips to deal:

- **Be Good:** I know, this website is a broken record. Its true, if you want your opinion to be respected you have to be good. You get good by listening to people who are good, reading and gaining experience.
- **Act Good:** A public affairs mentor of ours recently said, "I think most would be surprised at how far minimal skill, a bit of confidence, a little bravado and big balls will get you."
- **Listen:** Many of the opinions you hear are probably pretty good. Smart people with different perspectives will always make you better. If you show you are listening, people will appreciate that and increasingly support your recommendation.
- **Be Direct and Decisive:** You have to take in the entire situation from a well informed perspective then come up with a recommendation that you are prepared defend, will all the pros, cons, second and third order effects. You have to get access to the HIPPO and stare him into the eyes and tell him your recommendation, firmly and with confidence.

Sound easy? It will be. You'll be wrong a bunch (and live), you might get overruled by someone who doesn't know what they're talking about. That's all fine, life is about learning.

If you Be Good, Act Good and Listen you will gain a reputation in your organization of a person who knows what the fuck they're talking about.

-Dave B.

Judge a Staff Guy by His Enemies

Bureaucrats sigh when we walk in the room. My complacent peer rolls his eyes when we talk. We raise the blood pressure of the over-zealous security guy. Even some of the bosses clench their jaws a little harder.

We ask questions. We express opinion.

We start new initiatives we aren't directed to. We cause other people more work.

If you're doing your job well as a public affairs person, you will have enemies. There will be people you make uncomfortable. There will be naysayers who say you can't. There will be teammates who hope and assume you will fail.

No problem. It's part of the job.

I used to be troubled by these people. It used to bring me down when someone stands in our way. Now it only gives me energy. If you're breaking new ground and challenging the system you won't make everyone happy, celebrate that.

The cool thing is, some of these "enemies" will become advocates. You may even move some of these folks to action. You may become their example and inspiration.

Know you will have enemies, but look around and determine who they are. Make sure you are being opposed for acceptable reasons. Look in the mirror, determine if it was you who failed to communicate properly and be sure you have the best intentions of the origination in mind.

- Dave B.

Dear Bureaucrat

Dear Bureaucrat,

It's me, your Public Affairs Officer. I know you don't understand my role in this organization yet, but you will.

What I'm about to say is going to make you uncomfortable. I understand; that's natural for someone like you. For years, our risk-averse system has conditioned you to avoid change, shift decision-making, and create yellow lights.

Your instinct is to slow me down.

Fortunately for our organization and culture, I speed up at yellow lights. And you're coming with me.

Let me start with why. I'm going to do something important for our organization. I have a plan. I have the support of our senior leaders. I'm going to receive all necessary resources and approvals to make this happen. In the end, I am going to complete this initiative and it is going to be effective.

Here's where you come in: you are my path of least resistance to mission accomplishment.

Maybe you're the budget admin who needs to click a button on our funding request. Maybe you're the help desk worker who can get me the right software. Maybe you're an operations officer and you need to change up the way you engage some of our key partners. Maybe you're a member of my own Public Affairs team, with the skills and time necessary.

Whatever it is, you are a badge-wearing member of this organization, and to the extent I need you to be, you're going to be part of the solution.

I want you to understand, and support, this initiative. I truly do, because we're doing this for you, and for all our members, and for America. But whether or not you care, or buy in to this project, or get it ... it's going to happen.

You could take the time to argue with me. Send me your job description. Dig up doctrine and regulations. Tell me to speak with your boss. Tell me what your work hours are.

But, you'd only end up losing precious time and credibility. When this is all behind us, you will have done your part to support this command-wide initiative.

Take a minute, and use your brain. Knowing this is something you're going to end up doing either way, don't you think we should just get started now?

I'm your Public Affairs Officer. I always get the things I ask for, because I only ask for the things I need. Furthermore, I only ask for things I know I can get.

Are you ready?

- Dave C.

The News is for Everyone

For my organization, each day begins with our primary staff stand-up in the JOC. We discuss intel developments, legal actions, resources, maneuver units' completed actions and scheduled events, and internal admin and house-keeping needed to keep the machine running. We are focused on the mission, and because we communicate with each other all day, every day, our shared understanding makes the stand-up a series of updates, not briefings.

It's a short, 10- to 15-minute event that syncs professionals focused on different aspects of our organization's common mission. My contributions have varied: I've briefed the headlines; discussed indications and misinformation in social media; and updated the team on which senior officials will speak to the media that day, and the topics they'll cover.

Lately, something funny has started happening at these stand-up meetings.

More and more often, I have less and less to say by the time I get a chance to speak. The other staff primaries are using their time to talk about media coverage and public messaging. Intel talks about press reports and connect them to information in classified channels. Lawyers point out upcoming legal actions that may become public through court filings. Ops guys talk about how we can or should "message" the most complex operational events. Our admin folks include DOD press conferences on the JOC's daily schedule.

Wait ... isn't that all supposed to be my territory?

Hell no, the news is for everyone. I'm thrilled to be part of a team of leaders who pay attention to and value public communication.

I talk to my coworkers about messaging and the news throughout the day. The topics they mention at the stand-up are things I've already discussed with them, or the group, as news breaks or operations happen. Sometimes, they're putting my lessons in their own words. Most other times, they're adding new information or context to our previous discussions, since they're also smart and strategic thinkers.

It's all groovy, but doesn't solve my problem of having less to say at the morning brief. Good thing I solve problems myself: with the basics covered, I can go a level deeper. I talk about what the U.S. message is on emerging topics, as I've heard through the PAO network. I enlighten the team with the hard questions we anticipate, and the answers I've already proposed to our higher headquarters. Based on our wider PAO team's research, I add context to discussions about the media by sharing the non-Defense or regional trends and topics that are also dominating headlines. Sometimes I end up giving the team an impromptu class on the Pentagon press corps, or regional media bias, or the nature of recent leaks.

The news doesn't belong to you. The news is for everyone.

- Dave C.

Beating the PAO

Everyone loves to scoop the Public Affairs Officer and find things in the media before we've seen or shared it ourselves ... just like we all take pride in fixing IT problems without having to call the help desk, or knowing some obscure personnel regulation the S1 hasn't heard of.

You and your team might not be the first command members to catch every tweet and article that's out in open source. Lots of staffers will take pride in finding something in the news before the PAO, like it's some sort of competition.

Consider it a win that people are paying attention to and talking about what's in the news. After all, the news is for everyone. This is how our senior leaders, decision makers, and fellow Americans learn about many of the things we do to protect America.

Tell your teammates they're doing great work, and be ready to pull something from your bucket of responses: discuss the outlet's credibility; your relationship with the reporter; the topic's traction in Western press; upcoming DOD engagements on the subject.

Better yet ask questions and start a conversation about what they saw. How do they think that coverage could affect your unit or mission? Did it seem accurate? Well written? How did they find the article? Is this an outlet or writer they follow regularly? Have they seen any other outlets' coverage of the same topic?

Though you ought to know the day's latest breaking news, more important is your deep understanding of media trends and effects on your organization's resources, authorities and support.

- Dave C.

Your Favorite Staff Guy

Don't get me wrong, the J3 is good and nice to be close too. He knows the ops that we talk about. The J2, a tense but giving relationship; he milks the intel to get us something to say. The J2 also complains when we say it. But the JAG, oh the JAG he's a PA's best buddy. Here's why:

- JAGs usually understand the need for public disclosure, partly because they've studied the constitution. They 'get' freedom of the press and all that jawn.
- In the JOC, I'm happy to sit next to the JAG. He monitors ops as closely as we do. He has to understand the intel in order to get to an informed recommendation ... like us.
- He cares about language because language has legal consequence. We do too.
- JAGs are usually pretty good writers. They often copy edit our shit.
- Lawyers learn how to argue. Through information (not influence) w consistently present arguments.
- Like you, the JAG is a member of the commander's personal staff. He understands the close relationship you have with the boss; your role as an advisor; and the commander's position on important issues better than most.

Be close to your JAG.

- Dave B.



The SJA's Leader Rules

Remember we wrote about our friend, the JAG?

Consider this a sequel, to impart a long-time friend and mentor's leader advice.

Our staff judge advocate has this scribed, in chicken scratch, on her white board, crowded with more timely notes but owning real estate just the same:

- Do your Boss's work first
- Teach your colleagues about the work you've done
- Don't burn bridges
- Update frequently
- Include a meaningful 'so what'
- Prep for appointments with the commander
- Do your higher headquarter's work for them; steer the ship
- Anticipate senior leader questions and actions ... and be prepared

The efficiency, the completeness this list belongs on all of our whiteboards and should be included in each of our initial counselings.

- Dave B.

The IO and You

Every PAO wants to know, what do I do about my IO (Information Operations Officer)?

First the dude says he is in charge of all information ops which includes public affairs. Next he wants to see what you're going to say to the media. After that, he gets ran over in the parking lot by the information bus.

It's ok though. He's not in charge and everyone will know that because you will be great at your job. The key is to work closely with him. He provides some things that you and your staff may not. The IO may be your bridge into operations; the O in his title stands for 'Operations' what does yours stand for?

I had a few stories in mind for this post but they all went like this:

I report to a new job as the PAO. The IO tells me I work for him. I tell him that will never be the case. My team does great work. We do more great work. The IO and everyone else steps aside and allows us to continue to do great work. Operationally, we work hand in hand with the IO. He does his stuff, we do ours, together like a big information family.

The Bad

In most every organization I've served in, I have had the IO try to exert his influence over public affairs. There are several reasons why this will never work:

The IO has no real mission stateside, the PAO is busy while deployed and in garrison. There is no reason for your organization to add another (idle) layer of bureaucracy between the decision maker and the action. If your Chief of Staff or whomever demands you need supervision, look in the mirror. Do you suck? If so, stop and get better.

The IO simply can't keep up. You will be making real decisions in real time. Because he needs the background and context you already have to make his decisions, he will be too slow to get the mission done.

You work for the commander. In service and joint doctrine, you are on personal staff. The IO isn't, I think he works for the Operations Officer or something? Doesn't matter. A word of warning though, commanders will and should seek out people who produce results. If your IO has a tendency and reputation of producing results, why wouldn't your commander lean on the IO for all his information needs? Look in the mirror, do you produce results?

The Good

The IO can bring value. The IO thinks about information too. He is schooled in influence. He may have some cool operational tools at his dis-

posal. He might have interpreters, cultural advisors or technical tools. The PAO is always better to have a great relationship with the IO. Just like the PAO is better to have a great relationship with the S1, S2, S4 etc. Play to each other's strengths always.

Some words of wisdom from a senior public affairs NCO, "To avoid an IO mission-creep the PAO needs not avoid the IO but continually work with the IO. A good IO will understand their role as a facilitator in the staff to ensure all information related capabilities are coordinated and synched. We [PA] have to demonstrate our value as message developers. We have to be the masters of the message. If for no other reason but because we are the ones who will be communicating that message to the public. If there is a void the IO will look to others, like the PSYOP officer or another IO in their staff to start generating those themes and messages. This is a territory we need to vigorously protect. It is not always good to get into pissing contests but this is an area that is worth the fight if we are to be of any use to our commander."

Now, get to work. Do great work and no one will dare get in the way of that. Not the chief of staff, not the operations officer and certainly not the IO. This doesn't have to be confrontational, you shouldn't be citing doctrine about your position. Just do great work, report to those who enable you to do great work and the rest will work itself out.

- Dave B.



Someone Who Can Make Decisions and Direct People

That's who we work with; that's who you should work with, too.

There's a time and place to coordinate logistics with an action officer, or get the necessary background and context from a subject matter expert. However, when it comes to the tone, direction, timeline and approval of your products, don't forget you're a leader on the commander's personal staff and the organization's communication expert.

When you're working on a project with or through another staff section, or subordinate unit, be mindful of who's driving action and approval within their sphere. Is your "point of contact" constantly having to route things through their boss, then coming back with second or third-hand changes? Not only is this an unnecessary delay, it also opens you up to misinformation and confusion (which, in turn, could compromise your own credibility).

Do your organization a favor and introduce yourself to the decision maker. Get their take, and demonstrate your ownership and competence.

- Dave C.

Too Busy, Too Good at Your Job.

Be too busy, and too good at your job, to be your organization's additional duty monkey.

To be clear: sometimes you need to take on additional duties in support of your organization and the mission. It's part of your job. It's often great for your professional development.

However, when you find that you are the serial action officer for non-Public Affairs tasks such as planning distinguished visitor engagements, risk assessments, or special events, you are likely missing the opportunity to lead the organization's communication program.

First things first, take a look at yourself. Are you such a No PAO that your leaders have decided you have time to spare? Are you tagged for jumpmaster duties because you begged your way into jumpmaster school? Do you owe a solid favor to another team member? Are you maybe just the best person for the job?

If you haven't set yourself up for this treatment, it's time to do something about it. I've been in this position—I went into a Brigade PAO position where my predecessors under performed. Senior leaders misunderstood my role, by no fault of their own. It would have been easy to accept this new reality and coast through a deployment working for the IO section.

Instead: I got busy. I started talking to the ops and intel sections. I introduced ambitious Public Affairs options that our pre-deployment exercise planners didn't even know how to respond to. I got to understand the mission better than most headquarters members. I built and pushed a task tracker that drove a useful—and fun—communication program. I sought out reporters and told our story. I always had something to say, in my own words, at the commander's meetings. I wasn't always perfect, but things were always happening.

There were always other, easier targets for extra taskings. And I was always available to support their Public Affairs and communication needs.

- Dave C.

Givers and Takers

I'm deployed. I have limited time to fix what our country is doing in Afghanistan. Luckily I can work as much as I want. I am only limited by time, my energy and concentration.

Picture me moving from meet to meet, task to task building bridges and breaking down walls in order to enable action. I am empowering my team and my command to get things done. Like in a video game, I have a little box in the top right of the screen that measures my health. Interactions with some people are like picking up little health pellets, while interacting with others is like getting hit by a shotgun.

I run into a lot of people that need things. Some need my time. All need my attention. Some just want to talk, cause I'm a wild and crazy guy. Some want to vent. Some want to run an idea past me. I'm happy to do all of this, it's my job.

Many of these people give and take. I depend on many of these people. They also give me the opportunity to vent, talk, deliberate and conspire these are the givers. Some of these people only take these are the takers.

Be careful, don't become a taker. Here's how you avoid it.

- Be efficient. Learn to communicate well. Communicate clear, clean and correct.
- Know your stuff, explain the why you're talking then get to the f' in point.
- Be aware. Understand your surroundings and know when to communicate what. Don't grab people "for a minute" when they clearly don't have one. Example if you approach me in the middle of a workout, I will cut you.
- Be humble. What you have going on isn't the most important thing everyone has going on. We all have our shit.
- Be positive. If all you ever do is bitch, you're robbing people of their energy.
- Be good. Get it right the first time. If people have to tell you the same thing several times, you're screwing your buddies.

Look in the mirror, are you a giver or a taker? Now go and do likewise.

- Dave B.



Justifying Your Existence

As a young Infantry Captain I was impressed with the support company commander when he briefed how many gallons of fuel they delivered, how much ammunition and pallets of stuff they issued. The numbers sounded great; I just wasn't sure who got the gas and ammo and what they did with it. Recently, while preparing for an engagement, a colleague of mine was gathering information, "in case we need it." Even though we knew we wouldn't need it.

When a commander asks for a slide showing the number of soccer balls distributed (high numbers in green, low numbers in red), soccer balls quickly litter the countryside ... detached from what we are hoping to achieve overall.

Staffs produce slides that don't get used or even read. Commanders set and meet metrics. As good military professionals, often we churn.

I'm lucky to work with educated, self-motivated and high-performing people. Sometimes we go out our best efforts in the wrong places.

We churn, we create work or worse we drive our organizations toward metrics that are misaligned with our culture and overall end-state.

The single, only way to get around this is to start with why. First determine what you want to achieve, then build actions and metrics around it. As a communicator, coach your commander into clearly stating his end-state, why we are taking action and what we are trying to achieve.

Drive your organization to communicate about effects, not efforts. Don't waste time by counting soccer balls.

- Dave B.

A Very MaxDis Christmas

Among many things, the holidays are an opportunity for leaders and communicators to reinforce their organization's culture.

Does your organization encourage family time and shorter workdays during the holidays? If so, limit the mandatory events (including celebrations).

Are you a highly social group, focused on teamwork and esprit de corps? Put together an event that joins multiple directorates or units together. Unite them with common purposes beyond simply "it's the holidays."

Do you take pride in being quiet professionals? If so, then limit bombastic displays of spirit that do little more than give individuals an outlet to seek and receive personal attention.

Do your leaders emphasize health and physical fitness? Maybe don't pig out on shit. (this also applies to office birthdays, etc.)

If you've got folks away from home or overseas focused on operations, you need to keep your folks state-side focused on those operations.

Whatever you do, do not use "it's the holidays" as an excuse to do something inconsistent with your culture and values.

- Dave C.

Things Staff Guys Say Which Commanders Don't

I'm not a commander, but I do command my organization's communication. You want to be a staff guy? Walk around saying things like this:

- "Living the Dream, Sir!"
- "How many days until Friday?"
- "Still getting paid..."
- "Another day, another (insert sarcastic dollar value)."
- "It's your goat, I'm just holding the tail."
- "Hump day! Know what I'm saying?"
- "Just another day."
- "Same old."
- "Hey, I get paid either way."

We are not prone to advocate for false motivation (HOOAH!) or mandated catchphrases (Lead the Way!) but we recognize these are the result of a unit's widespread inability to interact positively and productively.

Every word you share is an opportunity to inspire and motivate the members of your organization. Make the words that come out of your mouth mean something.

-Dave C.

Stuff People Say to PAOs

You ever get tired of the awkward attempts to reference your job in a useless pleasantries? We don't.

- "Hey PAO, let's not put this on CNN."
- "What's in the news today?"
- "Big news day, isn't it PAO?"
- "Isn't that an OPSEC violation?"
- "Oh wow, I bet you've been busy," This guy is referencing some major news event that has nothing to do with your command.
- I'm talking to my wife on my cell phone and someone walks past, "Is that Barbara Starr?" My wife, "Who is Barbara Starr?"
- "Hyuck hyuck, what's on Facebook today, PAO?" Probably a lot of bullshit because Facebook is a cesspool.
- "Low turnout at yesterday's cake cutting. Guess you should've tweeted more about it."
- "Did you see that article in the Washington Post?" Turns out "that article" was in the New York Times and it also had nothing to do with our organization.
- "Did you see that article in Small Wars Journal?" Turns out "that article" was in the Small Wars Journal and does have something to do with our organization ... and it came out three months ago. Yeah, dude, we saw it and highlighted it for the command the day it was published.
- Walking down the hall, "Oh man, here comes the media."
- "Do you have a camera?" No.
- "Do you have any photos of this?" No.
- "Can you print these photos?" No.
- "Hey PAO, how do you spell 'simultaneity'?" I don't have a clue.
- "Hey PAO, don't tweet this, okay?"
- "Are you synced with IO on this?" Who knows, I haven't seen the IO for weeks. Have them give me a call if they have any tangible actions planned.
- "Who do you think is leaking all of that information?"
- "Add some strategic communications to this."
- "Hey PAO, can you design these slides / this pamphlet?" Maybe, but I'm going to spend more time correcting your messages and narrative. Be ready for that.
- "We can't all be the PAO and do whatever we want."

Do important and effective people non-ironically say things like this to you often? Look in the mirror and find better ways to add value.

- Dave B.

Go To The Meetings

We love to reference public affairs officers' 'if only' comments. I often hear PAOs say, "If only we had a seat at the table."

We do. We have a seat at the table because we go to appropriate meetings, add value and ... sit at the table.

Quick story: our commander needed a video to help him communicate an important, complex topic. The J3 told me he needs one. As soon as the J3 passed the information along, I asked myself, "Why didn't the commander just tell me?" Well, the video was discussed at a meeting and I wasn't there. My team paid the price.

Here is all the pain I am now bringing to the team:

- We need clarity. I'm trying to get clarity from the 15 people who were at the meeting but no one seems to know. Our boss, the commander, is traveling.
- I told our video guy about the requirement and he is ready to go ... but we don't know on what. He's waiting. A terrible place to be.
- The J3 was kind enough to relay what he knew of the requirement to me but now the J3 has a stake in completing the video. I'll have to explain to him he doesn't need to review and approve it before it goes to the boss; of course we still have to figure out what the requirement is.
- At the meeting, I'm sure the commander looked for me and I wasn't there. PAOs can't be everywhere but a good place to be is where your commander is. Manage time wisely, it's our only limited resource.
- Aside from simply identifying the requirement, there was likely a great deal of context discussed outside the specific request for a video. Missed all that.

The moral of the story is, prioritize being where your commander is. That's where decisions are made and organizational level communication is done. If you're not invited, invite yourself. If you're not allowed, then do a better job and keep trying. PAOs help commanders and organizations communicate.

Don't miss the chance to be the PAO by missing the meeting.

- Dave B.



People are Going to Suck

It's a fact of nature. People you rely on for support, resources, effort, information and cooperation will do sucky things. They will lie, quit, put themselves first, and hurt your organization's ability to focus on mission.

Here are some tips:

- People are going to suck, but it doesn't need to rattle you. Plan for it and reduce your vulnerability to drama. Rather than going through life hoping people won't suck, and inevitably becoming frustrated when they do, just prepare yourself now. Don't let suckiness bring you down; be ready to adapt and overcome.
- Similar to our old friend *The Leak Conversation*, it doesn't tangibly matter who sucks, or how much they suck. There's no useful reason for us to sit there and talk about the ways in which others suck. Identify the next steps ... either you're going to work through them anyway, or there's another way to go about your business.
- We don't need to join them. Focus on mission and be part of the solution.

- Dave C.

Your Team

Styles Vary, Quality Doesn't

You're a great person and you bring a lot to the table as a leader and a Public Affairs Officer. Our personal background, relationships and passions help us stand out, and bring unique opportunities to our organizations. Each of us will individually nudge our organization's communication momentum in a different direction, based on how we work and what we care about.

Styles vary, but quality doesn't.

To me, these are the qualities I look for in all teammates. If you have all three, you have a place on my team. If not, we need to figure out what you need in order to get there, or if there's another role or way where you can be effective.

Be a self starter.

Know that you are empowered to achieve results. Don't wait to be given permission. Be proactive and make decisions based on our commander's intent. Know what's being worked on and do something about the tasks that are being dropped.

Be adaptable.

Your organization and your office will change frequently. If it doesn't, then go ahead and lead change yourself. Iterate and improve. Challenge yourself and your teammates.

Want to be there.

Be fired up to walk through the door every morning. Love the organization you represent. Embrace the opportunities and challenges with a grin and a great attitude. This is the hardest to come back from if you don't have it.

That's it.

- Dave C.



Maybe it's Genetics

A Sergeant Major was mentoring me on getting a command-wide initiative completed. I kept running into a block, because one of the guys I had to work through wasn't getting it done.

"Maybe it's genetics," said the Sergeant Major.

He told me a story about a specific kind of breaching his team did. He described which position (person) on the team normally conducts the breach, where each position goes and how the breach is completed. But this breach depends on physicality. You can't be too short or too tall to perform this breach, you have to be in the range of a certain height. Whether or not you can perform this breach from this position on the team is driven by genetics.

The same thing applies, he said, to getting other things done. Just because a person holds a certain position, doesn't mean he or she is the right person for the particular task at hand. Sometimes, you have to Task Organize for Purpose.

Seems obvious? It's not. Watch your organization and the organizations you work with. Consider how often we are depending on people for certain tasks solely based on the position they hold rather than their abilities.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes you have to put aside the org chart and reorganize to get things done.

The only thing you can't delegate or reorganize is responsibility. For everything else, consider genetics.

- Dave B.

Everybody Needs to Know Everything

My office believes in "need-to-know" information. As in, everybody needs to know everything. Here's how we do it.

Set a group distribution list and use it for everything.

When staff partners and PAO friends fail to CC your group e-mail, politely correct them. When one of us takes the initiative to read through a long report or article, we'll highlight the main points and forward it to the team. Yep, our inboxes get filled up. We manage them like professionals and don't talk about it.

One calendar to rule them all.

In an office of 12 people, our calendar is sometimes crowded but the shared understanding is important. Each entry begins with the attendees' initials in brackets: [DC], etc. Other members add their initials to meetings they'd like to jump in on. Our calendar includes meetings with other staff sections, reminders to make phone calls, workouts, and time blocked off to focus on big projects.

Sync daily.

We do, at 9:30 a.m. and it takes 10-15 minutes. We pull up the office calendar on the TV in our office, go through it as a group—we also hit the highlights for the next two days, for clarity. Then we go down name-by-name so everyone has an chance to give their top priorities, opportunities for collaboration, barriers they need knocked down, and bridges they need built.

Take your phone calls on speaker phone.

Out of courtesy, make sure the person on the other end of the call is aware.

Who else needs to know?

Make it a habit to call or forward, and summarize, relevant information for your friends and partners across your organization and the Public Affairs enterprise.

Note: The clear exceptions apply to classified information, and the things you've been told in confidence. Have a bias for sharing, but I expect you to use your brain.

- Dave C.

Everyone Knows Everything All The Time

There's more to the formula. Review: Everyone in my shop knows everything, all the time this is called shared understanding. Understanding enables action. Action gets the mission done.

In fact, not everyone knows everything, all the time but we strive to.

How do we do it? I travel a lot, so it isn't my great communication skills and fun personality.

Here is how we seek to achieve shared understanding:

- **Sync.** We have a daily sync, every morning. The purpose is four fold. Understand the calendar, identify opportunities to collaborate, identify things that are important enough that everyone needs to know and tell me where you need help (I build bridges and knock down walls for my people).
- **Calendar.** The shared calendar is a policy document. The calendar is how we delineate the expenditure of our most limited resource Time. You'll be surprised at the opportunities for collaboration a shared calendar brings.
- **Slack.** Start a Slack with your team today. Mostly we share the news, we provide internal commentary on the news. We pass updates, work on changes and work together for common purpose on Slack. I travel, my crew works out of two offices. We always know what's going on, all the time.
- **OneNote.** If you're not rocking OneNote in your shop, its time to start. The days of a tired, long, outdated SOP are over (if you even remember those days). OneNote allows you to store and sync all of your information in one, easy to search place. If someone has a question, the answer should be on OneNote. If it's not, put it there as soon as you get an answer. You'll never have to ask that question again.
- **One Email Address.** Never, ever send an email without copying your whole team. Get your organization to make one distribution list for your shop and only use that, ever. Be disciplined. The only thing I accept single addressed emails on are contract and personnel issues; all else we always copy the distribution list. Email sucks.
- **Talk.** We don't make time to do lame ass social things but we do make time for whiteboard meetings and physical fitness events. Your team must have an open communication and collaborative environment. Only you can figure out how to make that happen.

The power of a team where everyone knows everything is immense.

- Dave B.



Stop, Collaborate and Listen

At MaxDis, we collaborate on (most) posts. On the best, I'd argue. Wordpress only lists one of us as the author for each post. But my favorites, the ones with clarity and insight and good grammar, are the ones we write together.

It ain't just about blogging. Look at important articles in major newspapers—the ones with deep reporting, requiring multiple sources and fact checks. They may have two or three credited writers, and a few more contributors acknowledged at the end of the article. There's power in a network of professionals.

At work, we have as many team members touch a product as time allows. It's not a hard and fast rule, and we don't create barriers to shipping by 'waiting for' nice-to-have reviews. These have been our unwritten, and effective, rules for collaboration (I guess they're written, now):

Talk.

We talk all the time—about the news, about how our products are being used, about what we're working on, about what's next, about what's not working. Everybody knows everything because we CC each other on e-mails, chat all day and night, and take our calls on speaker phone. Even when we're focused on distinct projects, we are subconsciously digesting and finding inspiration that can help our team members.

Step up to the white board.

A blank white board has a psychological effect on people—I don't know

if it's the physical posture of standing around it, the colors of the markers, or the fact that everyone's focus is on the words in front of them. Maybe it's the fumes. When it comes to quality and accurate final products, a ten-minute white board session resulting in a scribbled outline is more valuable to me than two hours blocked off to work alone.

Make teamwork infectious.

My teams collaborate on content, narratives, videos, booklets, public affairs guidance and briefings when we're truly excited about the end result—the opportunities the product will create. This comes naturally when you have a team of people who want to be there.

Deliver content, not ideas.

I'm often guilty of this but am working on it. Make the product better, rather than telling someone else how they can make the product better. If there's information that needs to be researched, find it yourself or clearly articulate the facts that need to be asked by whom to whom (and how those facts should be shared).

This can be messy. Version control and competing priorities complicate the process, so you've got to pay attention to actions, next steps, and what's falling between the cracks. This goes back to always talking as a team. Drive toward a shippable product—don't delay shipping because it would be nice to have one more review. Someone, probably you, needs to codify next steps and timelines. "Hector, just to confirm, you're going to edit that briefing card, then send it to Roland for approval, right? Can you really do that by 3 p.m.? Because if not, someone else can review or Roland can just take it now."

- Dave C.

Coffee Breath Close

There's a lot of shit out there about working at home. Popular companies have adopted the concept and used it in their recruiting strategies. It's even a premise of a great book *The Four Hour Work Week*. It won't work if you're trying to achieve true greatness.

Even while working [at work], big boss men vie for offices where they can 'have privacy' or meet with people or whatever. Screw all that: collaborate.

We've all worked in Joint Ops Centers. Remember the magic and synergy that comes from everyone being locked up together? Think about what comes from the organization's focus strewn up on screens around you while everyone that has the answers, inputs, insights, or perspectives you need working is in the same room...in the same room, coffee breath close.

Stop dreaming about not brushing your teeth, gaining 30 extra pounds while lounging around in your pajamas all day "working" from home. Get rid of the idea of a secluded office with all your past accomplishments tacked up on the wall. Break down walls and work with your people. Create a free and open environment where everyone can make comment, crack jokes, and add essential input into the topic of the day. Collaborate by being present, together. Learn to love the smell of your coworkers, 'cause that smell means you are working together. Get your organization to create a JOC like environment or just do it with your crew.

The myths? I need to have private meetings. Yep, I walk to a private place. I need to have private phone calls. Yep, I walk to a private place but you'll be amazed by the useful insight your team gains from listening to your calls. I need time to think, away from it all. I do that too, at the pull up bars or I go somewhere I can think separately. My biggest challenge is not getting involved in the detailed shit that doesn't require my involvement. A little discipline here goes a long way.

Work from home? Great, if you work alone. It's 2017, no one successful works alone and organizations don't excel on the merit of disconnected individuals.

- Dave B.

The Whiteboard Solution

You can solve anything at a whiteboard. Anything, no matter how abstract or complex.

Too often we stare at PowerPoint slides, unable to achieve understanding through a one-way discussion. Nothing is solved: we convey ‘what we know’ without establishing where we’re going. New ideas are squashed, no collaborative insight is gained.

“In place of maps, whiteboards began to appear in our headquarters. Soon they were everywhere. Standing around them, markers in hand, we thought out loud, diagramming what we knew, what we suspected, and what we did not know. We covered the bright white surfaces with multicolored words and drawings, erased, and then covered again. We did not draw static geographic features; we drew mutable relationships—the connections between things rather than the things themselves.”

- Retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams*

Here’s how:

Start with Why

Sound familiar? The first thing we write on a white board is “WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO ACHIEVE?” You’ll be surprised how figuring out the ‘why’ will drive the rest of your action. Your “why” on the top of the white board, in writing, glares down at us and shames us each time you get off track. We ask, “what kind of headlines are we trying to achieve?” and then continue to ask questions, like, “why headlines?” You might think you need a press release but discover the “why” drives you toward a RTQ because “why” is about outcomes, not efforts.

The Guy with the Marker

The guy with the marker captures the discussion. Johnny-on-the-spot has to listen because in a good whiteboard session comments are coming from everywhere. Ideas, when written, beget more ideas. Write them. Anyone can get up and grab a marker and join in. The “guy with the marker” (gender-

neutral “guy” of course) is neither the leader nor the lackey, just someone who can feed the room’s energy and move fast. Bin comments and categorize ideas; similarities and synergy will form. On a white board, you can draw lines and arrows connecting thoughts, creating chronology or showing disparity. Invest in many colored, not-cheap markers. Time: It’s our only limited resource. Don’t hold a white board session for more than 30 minutes. 30 minutes keeps you on track and excitement alive.

Break this rule deliberately: go longer or shorter if the subject moves you, but plan on a half hour or less.

Take it Easy

Fix your culture so everyone feels welcome to bring magic. The best ideas often come from people least connected to the subject. Let everyone have a say. Keep the whiteboard session lively and informal.

Find a Smart Friend: It’s often useful to invite a subject matter expert. We’ll invite an intel professional or a communications (S6/N6/J6) guy to the party. These people bring unique insight and will inform the discussion; plus they have good ideas because you asked them. ProTip: Bringing an expert from an adjacent staff section helps you get buy-in from that section. It’s one thing to tell your J2 you’ve got a great idea ... it’s another thing to have a J2 staff member know it’s their idea, too.

Make it Actionable

Drive toward and arrive at tangible, actionable items with responsibility assigned. Use one of the white board’s corners to catch these and put people’s initials next to them. The guy with the marker should close the session by bringing everyone back toward tangible actions and reviewing the responsibilities. Walk away from a whiteboard session with next steps; without it you will have wasted everyone’s time.

You can tackle anything at a whiteboard. Anything. We go to the whiteboard to write speeches, to sort out manning, to talk budget, to create communication plans, to teach and to learn new subjects. We keep a blank whiteboards around the office for impromptu sessions. Successful communication endeavors are creative; nurture that creativity at a whiteboard as opposed to stifling it through PowerPoint.

- Dave B.

Smaller, Busier Teams

In “If Only,” I hope we touched a nerve with our line about firing poor performers.

In “Styles Vary, Quality Doesn’t,” I shared the three qualities that will earn someone a place on my team.

Before you complain that busyness doesn’t define productivity: we get it. Simply being busy doesn’t benefit any organization. Being busy because you are engaged, choosing what you do, and doing the right things, benefits everyone.

Our boss often says, “If you want something done, give it to a busy person and they will get it done quicker and faster.”

People flourish in productive busyness. People wither in too much downtime.

Know the signs. Are your team members having long, personal conversations in the mornings, at least two times in a week? Do find yourself reserving workers’ time or task load “in case something else comes up?” Are you filling a position on your team just because it’s vacant, and you think it’s better to have somebody than nobody?

Too many leaders focus on hiring more people in order to simply grow staff or build redundancy. Along the same vein, leaders will invest their energy and relationships into protecting positions in a resource-constrained environment. Grow responsibility first. Organize your tasks and people for purpose. If what you do is valuable then your staff will grow around the valuable contribution not the other way around.

It’s time to re-focus your efforts on forming and nurturing a small team of high performers who embrace your culture and love your mission.

You will be surprised at what a few dedicated people with the right attitudes can accomplish.

I’ve made the mistake of simply filling gaps more than once. When the fit is wrong, opt for the gap. Otherwise, the poor performance and distraction will hurt the unit and the mission. A leaky battery will still light a flashlight but it ruins it at the same time.

(I know we don’t always have this choice. I was a PAD commander, I know you need to deploy with a unit at full strength, and I know the recruiters will send you a body if there’s a vacancy. Be creative and deliberate on what you consider a “team” and how you develop it.)

- Dave C.



Someone Moved My Stapler

Finally. After a few months in the job, you feel like you have things set. You’ve found the bathroom. You know how long it takes to get to work. Wow, you even have a good feel for what the boss wants and needs.

Time to change.

Change where you sit. Change where your coworker sits. Throw your base PAG in the shredder and start again from scratch. Realign the jobs of the people in your shop. Rewrite your job description. Maybe just GTFO and head to Afghanistan.

No time? Make some. It’s worth it.

In regularity there is comfort. Comfort has gravity. Comfort makes you want to stick with what worked in the past. Break the chains and challenge yourself.

How would you do your job today, if today was the first day?

Forget the achievements and mistakes of the past, those never happened.

Disrupt the present.

Allow disruption to birth creativity.

Move your stapler and see what you and your team are capable of.

- Dave B.



Short-Staffed

“Well, Sir, the Public Affairs Office is short-staffed right now so I don’t think we’ll be able to support that request.”

Gross. Nobody wants to work with the Public Affairs Officer who makes themselves the victim. When we say things like “we’re short-staffed,” we make it clear that someone else is in control of our priorities and circumstances.

My Public Affairs team is never Short-Staffed.

But, we are often Committed To Top Priorities.

We are geographically split up to focus on different projects. We are busy looking for and hiring the right people to fill vacant positions. Our people travel, in order to help our organization by building new opportunities and relationships. People take leave to recharge with the family.

In those circumstances, it doesn’t matter if we’ve only got five or two or one person left in the office ... the only thing that matters is if, and when, we take on proposals to create new PAG, narratives, slides or campaigns.

When we can’t, we’re direct about it, rather than play the “we’re short-staffed” card and subject our guests to our troubles.

For example, here are three possible ways to respond to the staff officer who comes into your office, asking you to make a video when you lack the time or manning to support:

- “This is a good idea. We’re committed to other priorities we need to

wrap up first, but let’s schedule a white board meeting for the end of the month to sketch out a plan of action.”

- “I see the potential in this video, but I can’t say when we’ll get to it. This won’t supersede the other important projects we have coming up. This will go on our list, and when we have time, or we start to see an urgent need for a video like this, we’ll give you a call and start talking about it.”
- “This idea is never going to make it onto our team’s list of priorities. We won’t take this on, but since you are a badge-wearing member of this organization, let’s find time to sit down for 20 minutes and talk about other ways you can control this communication challenge you’re facing?”

I choose not to use the phrase “short-staffed,” just like everything my team does and doesn’t do is a choice.

We own those choices, nobody makes them for us. And when we choose to take on a new responsibility or initiative, we’ll own that as well.

- Dave C.



The Helpful Office

I once worked in an office full of super helpful people.

In this helpful office, everyone responded to everyone else's needs. Everyone offered an opinion. Everyone was there to help everyone else. In the helpful office someone once blurted out, "I need a light bulb."

For the next 15 minutes the entire office searched their draws, look through their things and called around looking for a light bulb. We don't even use light bulbs. Alas, someone found a light bulb in an adjacent office! Mission complete, right?

Wrong, mission distracted.

The office I work in now isn't helpful. This office is much better. People are focused on their task. If one of our professionals is directly asked for help, help is given. If we have an opinion, we offer it but only if it supports the mission.

In my super productive office, you can find your own light bulb.

The point here is, you want people to be focused on getting important shit done. You want focus on quadrants 1 & 2. Not looking for the simple task to distract (quadrant 4); even if the distraction is hidden under the guise of helpfulness.

Work in the dark if you have to, but stay focused on the mission.

- Dave B.

The Board of Woe

The Board of Woe. It's a powerful thing for you and your team, when you use it correctly.

These are the tasks that you must complete, no matter what.

When 1700, or 1800, or 2000 rolls around, the Board of Woe kicks you and your teammates into overdrive. Huddle around it and make a plan of action. All hands on deck, nobody goes home until the Board of Woe is clear.

It's a contract with your team. A clear indication of your commitment to one or two top priorities.

Put it somewhere central, where your whole team can see it. Empower team members to add essential tasks, when appropriate. Empower other team members to collaborate and drive those tasks forward.

Quadrant 1 items go on the Board of Woe. So do Quadrant 2 items when you've got to drive progress.

We don't wait for things to happen to the items on the Board of Woe, we make them happen.

"Why did you spend all day working on that other thing? That wasn't on the Board of Woe. No matter, now we've got to handle the Board of Woe."

When all the other staff sections are on their way out the door; when all your distractions have left the premises; the Board of Woe stands strong. "But we can't complete that Board of Woe task! We need Steve for that one, and Steve left work hours ago." ... "Fuck Steve! Call him back in or find a way to do it without him. It's on the Board of Woe, so we're going to do it tonight."

After a day of distractions and meetings, the Board of Woe holds the key to a day's work done well. Cross off those tasks, and you can rest tonight knowing you served your mission and nation.

The Board of Woe is driven by effects, not efforts.

The board of woe doesn't say which task is whose responsibility. It is all the Team's responsibility.

The Board of Woe can't have twenty things on it. That's unrealistic. That's purposeless. It devalues the crises, reporter deadlines, and mission-driven requirements you absolutely must address.

The Board of Woe is how you make time when you don't have time.

- Dave C.

Everyone is a VIP

The guy from facility maintenance walked into our office the other day. We offered him a good cup of Nespresso. We greeted him as a team. The leaders stopped what they were doing quickly and said hi. We asked him what we could do to help. He was introduced to people he didn't know. We offered him a book from the library. He admired the fish tank. We treated him the same way we treat everyone, like a VIP.

Why? Three reasons:

It's the right thing to do.

The golden rule. This is how we'd like (and expect) to be treated so we treat others the same. We are ambassadors of the culture. We want everyone in our organization to have a "yes" attitude. It's part of our internal communication program. The PA shop gets to yes no matter the issue or customer. We act like it.

It's great to have allies.

A simple cup of coffee and hand shake goes a long way later when you're in a pinch. This isn't why we treat people like VIPs, it's just an added benefit.

It's good for the team.

Your PA shop, no matter how small will come to appreciate the goodwill we spread by being a proper hosts.

Everyone that comes to our office gets this treatment. Everyone. Some guy came by to fix our computers. Someone stopped in to ask for directions. The security guy checked on our alarms. "Before you go, sit down and grab a cup of coffee. While you're here, meet the team. Have you seen our latest communication product? We're interested in what you think."

Every member of your command is important.

Be the way you (and your commanders) expect your organization to be.

Live your internal message. Treat others the way you wish to be treated.

- Dave B.



Use What You Have

I love listening to staff officers--especially PAOs--give the "if only" talk. There are lots of folks out there who could end the war and conquer the world ... if only they had a couple more people on their team, another HD video camera, and access to the commander.

Sometimes, I'm as guilty as the rest of us. When I spend time and energy Wanting the things I can't have, I don't have the time and energy to Do the things I should be doing. But, when I spend time and energy Doing the things I should be doing, I don't Want any of the things I can't have.

Two problems with being a Wanter instead of a Doer:

First, you're not going to get the things you want ... because you're not obsessed with taking action and achieving effects. Commanders don't reward staff officers who are all talk, no action.

Second, you've established that it is your nature to be a Wanter. If you get more positions added to your section, you're going to Want to send them to training or buy more equipment. If you get another HD video camera, you're going to Want a new lens and computer ... and another camera to get multiple angles while filming. And if you get access to your commander's meetings, you're just going to Want to go on their TDYs and access to their calendar.

Use what you have, and take action.

People.

Sure, it sounds great to have a robust team of skilled military journalists and communicators, executing the commander's priorities. If only you had

more people, you could stop spending all of your time justifying and recruiting and training and managing and replacing those people.

Don't you see the cycle? Try this: release yourself of the admin tasks of growing your team beyond the bare minimum capacity. Reinvest that time and credibility into Doing your best public affairs work. Keep your team small and busy.

Resources.

You have a limited amount of equipment. Or no equipment. For as much time as PAOs spend pouring over the ESPS or DVAS equipment lists, we actually work in a surprisingly low-tech career field. If you're focused on building a command information plan, then get to know your Soldiers and tell creative stories. Snap photos with your iPhone, write and share compelling stories, and do it over and over again. Either your leaders will reward your Doing with equipment to Do even more ... or they'll be impressed and satisfied with the amount of Doing you Do.

Access.

Commander doesn't have time for, or isn't interested in, Public Affairs? Get to work and Do something connected to the commander's priorities. Do lots of things that are connected to the commander's priorities. Do only things that are connected to the commander's priorities. You'll catch their attention, and when they meet a communication need or crisis, they'll call you: a PAO with a Doer reputation.

Time.

Let us know if you figure this one out. It's our only limited resource. Spend the time you have as a Doer, not a Wanter.

- Dave C.



Future Leaders

It's your job to invest in your team. It's your job to make them better for this job, their next job and life. Time is our only limited resource but there's enough time for this:

- There's enough time for your people to do PT.
- There's enough time to write a letter of recommendation. There's enough time to get your boss to write a letter for them.
- There's enough time to have a group professional reading program. There's enough time to provide feedback, good and bad.
- There's enough time to send your people to schools. There's enough time to meet with mentors.
- There's enough time to counsel. There's enough time to explain why.
- There's enough time to pay attention to your coworkers' mood.
- There's enough time to talk about fitness and diet.
- There's enough time to read stuff you don't have to ... especially MaxDis.
- There's enough time to write.
- There's enough time to ask for clarification.

Build a culture where your coworkers turn into future leaders. Make time. Build a culture that makes your team ready for the next job.

- Dave B.

Reduce Your Vulnerability to Drama

It's your choice to make your work look effortless. You also can, and should, actively reduce your vulnerability to others' drama.

A company commander or team leader will work to mitigate risk and reduce exposure to accomplish their mission and keep soldiers safe. Likewise, you and I must actively work to reduce our vulnerability to the things that impede success: distractions, lightbulbs, middle men, yellow lights, and most of all, drama.

This include the drama your life injects into the workplace, as well as the types of non-dramatic people you choose to do great work alongside.

You make the decision on how much drama you allow, foster or participate in.

Everybody has their shit, and so will you. Do you have a relentless focus on mission or are you happy to engage in destructive water cooler talk?

Drama is the shit that comes up but ought not detract from your team's momentum. Much of it grows from ego, vanity, or a lack of confidence.

Some examples:

- a constant need for pep talks or attention
- gossip
- repeated mistakes, and failure to learn from those mistakes
- inability to resolve or move past daily squabbles
- thin skin and hurt feelings
- failure to take action when one knows what to do
- long e-mail chains where a phone call would solve the problem
- slobbishness
- hiding or hoarding information

Its very easy, even exciting, to add input, tolerate or foster drama in your workplace. You have to make deliberate decisions to avoid and discourage it. When a team mate's recurring drama forces them past a threshold where they are no longer adaptable, don't take self-starter actions, or don't seem to want to be there, it's time for a leader talk. Ask the right questions. Are they capable of thriving in your environment? After all, we prefer smaller, busier teams.

Most importantly, don't look in the mirror one day and catch yourself injecting drama into your team. Work hard, above all else. Make it a hard exception that drama detract from your workday ... and balance it with your aforementioned focus on mission.

Drama sucks. Get away from it.

Critical clarification: Drama comes in many fashions, but don't compare it to Real Tragedies like life-changing injuries or sicknesses, family hardships, or major career adjustments.

- Dave C.



How to More Quickly Overcome Being the “New Person”

You're new to the office. While you will not know certain things, there are professional traits, common sense actions, and the good side of human nature that are constant. Act on these as you observe your organization's culture.

Some reminders:

1. **Arrive early** to learn more/catch up, get ahead, or to assist the rest of the office with identifying hot topics. Working in a public affairs office where news and information are key to the Command and mission? Even more reason.
2. **Contribute to the greater good.** Bring in a healthy snack. Grab someone's lunch for them while they are crashing on a project. Pass on the love. Then, there's coffee: 'you kill the jo, you make some mo'
3. **Ask questions**, but if it's clearly a busy office and you have the ability to find answers and have been pointed that way (either on the portal, SharePoint, Google, however it may be), try to solve it yourself. Your teammates will appreciate your self-sufficiency.
4. **Start with why.** You may not have all the background, relationships, or experience, but you must begin with a firm grasp on what your organization is working to achieve (hint: in DoD, it's connected to protecting America, no doubt). Keep this as your baseline as you learn the ropes start with why.

- Joe H.

Why Every Office Should Have a Fish Tank

A 10-gallon, tropical fish tank is cheap and easy to maintain. We use them a lot. “Use them?” Yep, the fish provide services.

My life coach and combat experience tells me that leaders need to take time to reflect or else they miss things and are prone to cognitive bias. Throughout the day I sit next to the fish tank for 1-5 minutes at a time, stare at the fish and think about what is really going on.

We regularly host “customers.” People throughout the command who come by to seek our services or provide us their services. The fish set them at ease. Almost 100% of our visitors excitedly say something like, “oh you have fish!” Then look at the tank and think for 1-5 minutes.

- The people who work in the shop appreciate having some life in our windowless office. Our people interact about the life and times of the fish. Fish talk encourages interaction.
- Our life-bearing fish have had two broods of fry. Although about 14 were born, 1 from the first brood and 3 from the second lived to become contributing members of the fish society. Let this be a reminder, only the strong and creative survive. (sub point: the adolescent we have is now trying to mate with his mom ... got to love nature)
- The unknown: To quote one of our office mates, “there is some measure of satisfaction to be had through sustaining the life of another being.”
- I believe having an aquarium is against the rules. Great message. We break rules. We don’t subscribe the unsubstantiated policy put before us. We are guided by what’s right.

- Dave B.



The MaxDisclosure Office Essentials

You don’t need much to do your job and be a great Public Affairs Officer. Use your brain, use what you have, and be a doer (rather than a wanter).

All of that being said, here are some things we like and appreciate. We use them in pursuit of our mission. Maybe you could use them, too.

- **White boards.** Big ones, and lots of ‘em. We have several, and to make space we have to wheel them into the hall when we aren’t using them. Use them liberally, always with “What do we want to achieve?” written across the top. Throw white board markers at one another often, for effect.
- **Nespresso.** Boy, oh boy, do we love coffee. More importantly, our guests appreciate a good cup when they’re powering up for a white board session with our team. Get one of these, and keep a good stock of flavors for visitors.
- **A fish tank.** Every office needs a fish tank.
- **A work fleece.** Long nights in the JOC can be chilly. Be prepared for the long haul with one of these puppies. Your teammates will respect your preparation, and your style.
- **Plants.** We don’t have a conference table, we have a plant table. Plants bring life and character into your work space. Nurture them, and your teammates and guests will appreciate the atmosphere.
- **Standing desks.** Are they good for you? Who the hell knows. But when the commander or any of your staff partners pop in, you can either pivot around ready to attack, or struggle to get your fat ass out

of a chair.

- **Almonds.** Keep your energy up when crises force you to skip lunch or work through dinner. We keep one container stocked with two bags of plain almonds for every one bag of chocolate almonds, and then we shame the people who only pick out the chocolate ones.
- **A planner.** I go back and forth on these. Even this recommendation, the Full Focus one, can get obnoxious and over-marketed at times. The dude who markets these even slaps his own quotes throughout the book. Yeesh. At the end of the day, the best to-do list for you is the one you're going to use. Write down the next steps for your major tasks, check them off, then move on to the next day.
- **Uni Style Fit 3 Multi-Pen.** PenAddict.com is a guilty pleasure of mine, and you know how we feel about junky pens. The 0.38 ink refills write smooth and come in plenty of different colors. Black, blue and orange are my go-to combo; pick what works for you.
- **Uni-Ball Kuru Toga Mechanical Pencil.** If you're not a pen kind of guy, this pencil will treat you right without breaking the bank. Orange is my go-to editing color, so I even keep one with colored pencil lead.
- **Metal prints.** Paper and wood may rot and die, but like your organization's mission to defend America, stone and steel will last forever. Put your organization's top photos on these suckers to help your members swell with mission-connected pride.
- **Nespresso Half Caffeinato.** After 3 p.m., you might need one last jolt before digging into your Board of Woe. Hit one of these bad boys and get to work.
- **An essential oil diffuser.** Make your workspace feel like a spa of productive badassery. Lemongrass or citrus scents will boost your team's energy. Skip the flower scents.
- **Gadgets and fidget toys.** Another White Board Session essential. Crazy Aaron's Thinking Putty is great but will get gross after a while. The fidget cube is genius.
- **Brief.** A key part of last year's MaxDisclosure reading list. Joe McCormack is a patriot and expert communicator. Keep a hard-cover copy by your desk, and throw it at people when they drone on and on.
- **A recycling bin.** Leaders always talk about taking out the trash, but what about the environment, you animal?
- **Jefferson's Ocean.** For emergencies and Fridays.

- Dave C.

Your Organization



Figure Out the Communication Needs

We talk often about knowing your command's communication needs, like it ought to be second nature for you.

Yep, it is a solid PAO's second nature to observe, assess, prioritize and take action against their command's communication needs, but we here at MaxDis realize that's easier said than done.

When you're struggling to find a way to offer your skills and experience in service to your organization's resources, approvals, authorities and support, here are four ways to find a start point, generate options and decide on your next steps:

Learn the Vision.

What culture does your commander and star performers aspire to? What behaviors and efforts will your higher headquarters use as a model to your sister organization? What is your commander asking about and emphasizing often, maybe without even realizing it?

Get the Puzzle Pieces.

You know or are in the process of learning the vision for your organization; it's time to identify where that vision is disconnected from reality. It may not be clear, so start by asking casual questions to your peers and senior leaders; then grab a white board and put the story together.

Be Where Everyone Talks.

Your physical presence tells the people around you where your priorities fall. For us, that's the e-mail distribution lists our senior leaders use; our organization-wide meetings where senior leaders speak candidly about their efforts and challenges; and sitting all night long with the other staff sections in the Tactical or Joint Operations Center. For you, maybe its the DFAC, or PT every morning, even though you think you're "special" and don't have to go. Don't just be there, but be present and be prepared to join the discussions. Consider how discussions about real problems compare to your aspirational culture and effects (step 1) and one on one conversations (step 2).

Have a Unique Perspective

That of an outsider with competing priorities and concerns. Read the news and social media streams that your audiences read, then translate that into your organization's context and influence. With a healthy dose of reality, you can be a devil's advocate for your organization's communication initiative without being negative, or a dick.

It's more art than science, but this is the foundation for all your future initiatives and proposals. A firm grasp, and constant reassessment, of your command's communication needs will set you up to take action, explain your actions, receive command support, and ultimately communicate effectively for tangible results.

- Dave C.



Put Your Mouth Where Your Money Is

The under-funded and forgotten parts of your organization know the Public Affairs Office is an internal, free-of-charge way to highlight their potential, and publicly lobby your commander and higher headquarters for more cash and attention.

Like everything, this may be part of your job, but be careful. You're communicating to teach and clarify your organization's top priorities to a wide audience. Don't get caught out-of-balance, only tying yourself, and your organization's public image, to back-seat programs.

Lucky for you, the end of our fiscal year is coming up, and it's spend plan season for senior leaders. Your organization is going to spend its money, time and effort on it's most important priorities. Follow this process closely, and build a plan where those priorities guide next year's communication budget of stories and topics. Spend the year communicating, through command information and media engagements, the "why" behind top-budget items.

In other words, put your mouth where your money is.

Examples: Equipment upgrades because your soldiers must be a capable, lethal force. Big exercises because joint, realistic training prepares your units for combat. Specialty training and engagements for signal or intelligence technical experts who need to keep up with a changing, modern world. Major construction and renovation projects because your team values world-class training facilities and a professional culture. Deployments, because you protect America.

Your commander puts resources against their most important focus areas. Make yourself one of those resources.

- Dave C.

The Organizational Lightbulb

Remember the light bulb? If you don't, you should read it because it's important to this story.

There are even bigger lightbulbs to worry about.

Your boss should listen to what you tell him or her to say. Sometimes you want to push an initiative. Sometimes you want to highlight a good deed (in order to push an initiative). Sometimes you just want to BS about a topic that's on his mind in order to garner feedback from subordinates. We, as public affairs officers, should be helping the boss set the agenda and drive the discussion. The problem is, he or she is the boss.

If the boss says, "geez, I really like those kind of lightbulbs," your organization could go on a nationwide hunt for them. They might stop training or pull guys off of security to start looking for the lightbulbs the boss "wants." Maybe your officers will put their lightbulb exploits on their OER support forms and 1SGs might hold formations where everyone has to bring said lightbulb.

You see the problem? The boss's communication often requires just a light touch. Your organization is likely already moving in the right direction and the commander and command sergeant major just have to tweak it a little in one way or another. The last thing anyone wants is to derail your progress in search of the lightbulb of the day.

This being said, there are serious issues where you may want the boss to change the course of the organization. Here he or she should come out strong and demand the lightbulb cause it's a matter of critical importance. Just reserve these times for when it counts.

Public affairs officers counsel your leaders on communication, it's your job.

- Dave B.



Fake Competition

Platoon leaders want to have the highest physical fitness scores in the company.

Company leaders want to out-shoot their fellow companies on the range and battlefield.

Battalion leaders want to have the brigade's highest readiness statistics, and get the top accolades at the next JRTC rotation.

All of the sudden, brigade leaders get a Public Affairs Officer. How to use them? Maybe Public Affairs is another way to compete with and outshine your fellow brigades.

Then again, maybe it isn't.

Each day, we're surrounded by opportunities to spread mutually supportive messages. Your resources, authorities and operational support aren't contingent on sister units not receiving those things. After all, there's a reason America is safer when all of its military's units are awesome.

And it's our responsibility to steer conversations away from fake competition by understanding the organization's place in a global, strategic narrative.

Competition doesn't matter anymore. In fact, it's counter-productive.

Your organization is fighting to protect America, not Beat Navy.

- Dave C.



Are you the Headquarters PAO, or the HHC PAO?

If you're not careful, it's easy to fall into the HHC Public Affairs trap. You work in the same building as them, and you run into their folks at staff meetings and ceremonies. Boy, they do work hard to support your command, and they have ample opportunities to invite your photo/video dudes out to their events.

Like I said, it's easy. You need to highlight a Soldier in a feature, so just grab that great guy in the supply shop who always helps you out. They're putting together a super sweet community relations event and would really love to see a local reporter out there. They're doing a range, that one time, so how about sending a photographer out (they could use the photos on a storyboard for the boss, anyway).

Don't be the HHC PAO. Be the PAO to the headquarters focus on the strategic message, the real operations aligned with your mission, and the Soldiers closer to the frontlines. That's not as easy, but that's why it's better.

In the meantime, don't you have a cake cutting to get to?

- Dave C.

Media Relations



The MaxDis Media Rules

The media, as an entity, is a tool to convey information. Traditional media is in the same category of social media, a press release, the post newspaper or skywriting.

If you're good, you will establish a relationship with traditional media members. You will know your local media personalities and depending on the organization you represent, you will at least follow the national level journalists. Journalists are the way you use this tool.

Back in the day we used to work with the great Henry Cunningham from the Fayetteville Observer who knew my generals when they were young officers. He was a guide young public affairs people. Henry helped us make these rules real. He also carried a gigantic tape recorder, but that's besides the point.

Anytime you're engaging with the media, follow these basic rules to maintain trust, continue a constructive relationship and protect your organization's equities:

1. Always establish attribution.

Assume you're on the record until you both agree otherwise. This can be awkward, do it anyway.

2. Ask about the story:

- What direction will they be taking?

- Are they talking with anyone else? Who?
- Why did they choose this story compared to others?
- Will a story be produced?

3. Know the journalist.

Aside from having a relationship, determine the answer to these fundamental questions

- Are they trustworthy?
- Are they new and looking for a 'big' story?

4. Agree on ground rules

Affirm and reaffirm with each interview.

5. Correct the record immediately.

If one of your interviewees or anyone says something false, tell the media as soon as possible.

6. Consistently drive understanding.

Ask questions for clarity. Ask journalists if they get it. Don't be afraid to double down on your Forever Lines

- Follow Up. Ensure the journalist has good contact info and find out when the story will run.
- Be discrete. Media agencies are in competition. Be discrete in your interactions, be careful to protect their scoops and direction. If you are going to discuss an interaction with another media agency, get permission first.

As a public affairs pro, you'll need to reach your audiences through every available platform. The traditional media is often your widest but most risky tool.

Remember what Henry taught us to keep this tool useful while protecting yourself and your organization.

- Dave B.

Crashing the Boards

March Madness is upon us.

Teams who take shots and grab rebounds win.

In public affairs, we are hesitant to even take the shot, then we defend on the rebound. There are more useful techniques. Love sports analogies? This post is for you.

In basketball you have to drive toward the basket, find an opportunity and shoot. You're working against a shot clock while also being defended. You have to take shots to win. You can't score if you don't take shots. Even if you miss, you or your teammates can grab a rebound and take another shot to score.

Too often, we are the opposite in the conduct public affairs. We agonize over the announcement (the shot), we send through several reviews, we take so much time the newsworthiness of the event has passed or someone else has already reported without your perspective. Through too much careful planning, we miss the opportunity to shoot at all.

If we do get a shot off, we play defense. Our questions and answers are often written with the intent to defend the original statement rather than built to seize opportunities. We defend on the rebound.

To score and win in public affairs, seek to make timely, robust and newsworthy announcements. Avoid what-if negative thinking when drafting your announcement and consider positive opportunities. Make announcements to give the media reportable information and soundbites.

Understand your announcement will garner questions. Think of questions as chances to fuel stories with additional information. Good reporters are creative and may take a perspective you didn't forecast or don't want, try to engage the reporter in a useful way which is mutually beneficial rather than defensive. After the shot, look to score on the rebound.

Good public affairs is offensive. Start thinking that way.

- Dave B.

Seven Rules for RTQ

We've made it. A journalist asked a question. The journalist has enough interest in our topic that he or she e-mailed us. Once you respond they are likely going to report, Tweet or whatever.

Quick background: Most professional outlets will contact you before they report on your organization; often it's part of their editorial guidelines. Too often, public affairs offices have nameless e-mail boxes. Too often, public affairs officers respond via email creating an inhuman exchange prime for misunderstanding, confusion and delay.

Let's be better, here's how.

1. **Be human.** Create a human connection with the human on the other end of your phone call or e-mail. It's easy to criticize, second-guess and demonize a faceless and nameless robot. We're not robots; we're the good guys.
2. **Engage to understand.** Build the mutual human respect and understanding which satisfies everyone's needs and gives us the opportunity to be seen as credible, correct and competent.
3. **Fast is good, accurate is vital.** Own your responsibility to be correct, clear and clean – and do it in fast, flat and precise ways. Our job is to be right, all we do depends on the trust we earn, maintain or rebuild with every interaction.
4. **Be golden.** The golden rule means acting with empathy. What would you need to write an accurate and contextual story if you were the journalist? Maps, visuals, historical background? Anticipate their needs and you both win.
5. **We're on the record until we mutually establish we're not.** Speak with authority and assume you are always on the record. Establish attribution as soon as possible in every interaction with the media – even follow-up phone calls. Until you absolutely determine another attribution, you're speaking for posterity – and for the President and your mother to read your response.
6. **Be available.** Accessibility is a key part of our credibility. We miss the opportunity to be right when we're late. Take ownership of your responses to incoming queries to our shared inbox and be as responsive as you would expect if you were the one with the questions.
7. **Everything matters.** The picture others form of us is complex and multi-faceted. They will believe we are credible and competent if we prove it. If our attitude, eye rolls, sarcastic tone or sloppiness show, others will notice. And judge.

- Dave B.

Angry and Frustrated

We learn best from experience. This experience shaped me and is applicable to you and your brigade today.

During the surge in Iraq in 2007 I became the Brigade PAO with no training. I was just coming out of my third company command, the Army had selected me to be a PAO, I had a great relationship with my Brigade Commander and our PAO got fired; so I was the guy.

Because we were in a fairly contested area and it was the surge we had a regular stream of national media embeds. I would regularly send these embeds to my old battalion, to areas I knew well. This week I sent Sudarsen Raghavan from the Washington Post to travel around with my good friend and battalion XO.

Raghavan asked some good questions and saw what we wanted him to see. On the way back, the battalion XO had to make a quick stop to check on a Civil Affairs funded project. Raghavan was interested. We hadn't planned on this stop.

The project was a disaster. Nearly \$100,000 was dumped into this poorly constructed Iraqi government building which was falling apart before it was even occupied. We continued to spend more to try to fix it. My friend and battalion XO ended up with his full-color mug on the front page of the post, underneath it read his name and the words, "angry and frustrated."

I learned this:

- **Reporters are always reporting.** They can and will get a story on the way to a story. Like wearing a mic, consider them always on. Always.
- **Don't go blindly.** Seems obvious but think about how quickly a short stop turned into a national level story which was read by Congress. Our XO was only planning on a 5 minute stop to check on progress. Know what you are going to see, before you see it.
- **People tell the truth.** Our battalion XO was a man of character. The reporter asked him how he felt about the project and the XO told him, following all the rules of SAPP. Have an idea of what people are going to say before they say it. Never put someone in a position where telling the truth has negative consequences.
- **Work fast.** Once I got hint of what happened I alerted our Division PA shop who hooked the reporter up with additional background and context. This information rounded out the story better than if it focused only on this building.

A hundred people reading this blog will point out that this was my mistake and I should have done things better. Yep, that's the point.

- Dave B.



The Three, Maybe Four Forms of Attribution

Welcome to public affairs, you are always on the record ... unless you're not. And if you're not you have to be 100% explicit in mutual understanding between you and the media.

In the biz, we throw a common language around to make it easy. It's not that easy, it's not so common. Here are the typical descriptors which are not universally understood or agreed on, so each time and every conversation you must talk about it and gain mutual clarity.

On the Record

Use of direct quotes attributed by name. "We do good public affairs," said Maj. Glenn Ross, a spokesman for United Nations Space Command.

Off the Record

ONLY for the reporter's knowledge. He or she cannot use as part of the story. This is important: They CAN attempt to confirm off the record information with other sources. After they talk to you off the record they go dancing around the Pentagon saying, "I heard this thing, is it true?"

On Background

The reporter can use this information in the story, even in direct quotes but the names are left out. "We do good public affairs," said a defense official. For every on background engagement you must clarify what the attribution will be "A senior SOF official" "Defense official" "US official" "An of-

ficer who is very familiar with the subject" and so on. In general, we should not use background attribution but, in my opinion, it is acceptable when working with SOF.

Deep Background

One more rarely used but good to have in your kit. Again, you have to confirm this with the reporter but usually it means that they can use the information in the story but cannot attribute it: The United Nations Space Command does good public affairs. Usually stated as fact but with nothing attributing the fact.

Different media agencies have different editorial guidelines which allow them to attribute certain things in certain ways. Never assume you have an understanding with the journalist. Always talk this through.

Regardless of the agreed on attribution, never ever tell a journalist something you shouldn't. It's usually easy to figure out who is talking and why, don't have or give your boss a false sense of security by messing around with attribution.

What do we use in at DINFOS? SAPP? Yeah, never violate SAPP. Talking to a journalist on behalf of your organization is a privilege that we should hold dear. "Take it seriously," said a public affairs officer with deep knowledge of the subject who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he gave himself authorization to speak on the subject.

- Dave B.

Only When There is News

When does your organization engage the media? Publish a press release?

When do you hold a news conference or invite the media to your place?

These activities should be driven by the availability of newsworthy information. Either you have something to achieve or demand is driving action.

“Good Morning, I’m the organization’s spokesperson and I have nothing new to say today. Now, I will take your questions.”

“Good morning spokesperson, I have a question I’ve already asked on a topic about which I am not reporting.”

“Thanks for that question. Here is my canned response which I’ve already provided. I am going to say it in a little different way.”

My Special Organization

Press Release

DATELINE - This week our organization did something that it habitually does and the result was the same.

The date is different and there are some different people involved but generally there is nothing new here.

-30-

Too often, large organizations hold regular, habitual press conferences when they have little to report. If a press conference is what gives reporters access to you, you should make yourself more accessible.

When we don’t have something to report and the media isn’t reporting, why would we hold a press conference?

Instead of press conferences, hold news conferences. Gather reporters and subject matter experts and go on the record to discuss a topic that has broad interest to the public. The regularity of news conferences should be driven by the availability of newsworthy information to disseminate, or an overwhelming demand from your organization’s informed, experienced press partners to see public accountability.

The need to hold a news conference will come natural when a newsworthy event occurs, journalists will want to report on it (because its newsworthy). When many journalists are reporting on a topic, you will need to get everyone together and provide the record statement and answer questions.

The lack of proactive public engagement has nothing to do with a lack of transparency. As a public affairs person, you have to create a culture of accessibility. When a journalist is reporting on something they will call you and you should answer. When your organization has something to report to the public you call and invite journalists. Being transparent is not defined by the regularity of press conferences or press releases.

- Dave B.

Friends in Low Places

Feral cats can be nasty. Every once in a while you’ll see them sprinting from dumpster to dumpster, they live out in the wild, they’re street smart and potentially dangerous. In my former life as an Infantryman, I remember thinking of the media as if they were feral cats.

They definitely aren’t feral cats but I was right, in a way. The media know more than you do. They are often unconstrained, wily and smart. Media members have a better and less bias J2. You know, for sure, they have a better historian.

As an American, this makes me very happy. The free press is essential to a functioning democracy.

War Story: back in 2003 in Afghanistan, Greg Palkot came to our operating base. He was doing stand ups right outside of our tent. He lived with us on and off for a few weeks. He fucking knew everything about Afghanistan, Pakistan and the big picture. While I was only thinking about the few border checkpoints along the Pakistani border. He was a smart dude.

Fast forward a few years later and I drank a beer with a local reporter in Fayetteville, Drew Brooks. This guy was eager, energetic, interested in what I wanted to talk about. His senior, Henry Cuningham was a legend who again, knew everything about Fort Bragg, Fayetteville and the all of the associated units.

You should establish relationships with nearly every media person that has the potential to report on stuff related to your organization. You’ll grow to like most of these people. You should talk over the topics of the day and stay in touch. Maybe occasionally share a few beers.

In these relationships, trust is born. It is trust that enables a professional on or off the record exchange about a topic that effects your organization. Through these relationships you will also learn how to be better at your job, you’ll learn about trends.

Summary: the media is your best friend.

Get to know the media in your area of operations. Despite their ability to spread disease, feral cats can also have a positive effect on their environment. (For the record I don’t think the media are feral cats. It was just a funny and useful analogy.)

- Dave B.



Working with Pros

Yes I understand we don't pick nor choose the journalists we work with. We are transparent public affairs professionals who work for the government.

A commander of mine once said, "we work with pros."

With that in mind, strive to understand what makes a pro journalist. We work with everyone, but it's good to know when we're working with a pro ... and when we're not.

The Pro:

- **Has a deep understanding of the environment.** We don't have to spend a lot of time and effort getting them up to speed; they come with a base knowledge. Good examples here are the Pentagon Press Corps, who understand the workings and the Defense Department and America's defense efforts; the in-country based media. In Kabul, I get to work with Western journalists who have years of direct experience in the country, living here, reporting from here.
- **Cares about context and clarity.** Good journalists are driven by facts but serve them up with the proper amount of context to make the story clear. Sounds obvious? It's not. Fact-based journalism only goes so far understandable journalism is better.
- **Looks for the truth, not "the story."** The sage reporter drives himself to report the comprehensive story, which is often less interesting. The eager reporter wants to break news or report the cover up, even though it's usually not some kind of conspiracy. There are simple, hu-

man explanations for everything. Unfortunately, the simple explanations doesn't bring the clicks.

- **Can compete with their editors.** Too many times a journalist gets the story and writes the story, only to have the story changed by an editor who has her own take. A good journalist can compete with their editors.
- **Hasn't made up their minds.** If the writer already "knows" the story and only needs a comment or is going to write what he wants regardless of what you say, he's not a pro. Things change, new developments happen, a good journalist is open to writing about it.
- **Stands out from the pack.** The media reports in packs. One person leads, everyone chases then again and again. You might find the person who is willing to take a different tact or perspective. The good ones aren't afraid to buck the group.
- **Is apolitical.** We're an apolitical organization. We can't afford to be drawn into someone else's political agenda. We have vital work to do, and distractions are killers. If an outlet, editor or individual journalist needs data points for a partisan hack job or will run whatever we discuss though an unrelated political filter, they can call someone else. The sensationalism and warping effects don't do anyone any favors. They're harmful to us and the audiences We treat all journalists fairly and equitably. We're in a weird time. The term journalist is not easily defined. As we stand now, we'll treat everyone equally everyone: the Washington Post, the Fort Gordon Booster Club Blog,

Breitbart, RT, CNN, and 1LT A Lady - they're all journalists.

My definition of journalist these days is similar to President Trump's definition of hacker:

"I mean, it could be Russia, but it could also be China. It could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, OK?"

- Dave B.

The Problem with Bias

Everyone has biases. Some of us wear our bias on our chests, “US Army.” We all see the world through a lens which has been shaped by our knowledge and experience.

Because of these biases, we are susceptible to misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

You have to watch yourself and prevent your biases from causing you to make bad decisions.

Even the best journalists have biases. It’s why they work so hard to understand and gain several different perspectives on a story. The best PAOs help journalists understand things holistically, even the not-so-great parts.

The worst journalists regurgitate the PAO’s talking points. The worst PAOs serve talking points which lack analytical rigor, are incomplete or false.

It’s not your job to fool journalists into only reporting the good news. Even if it was you’re unlikely to succeed, they’re savvy. It’s not your job to flagellate yourself or your organization either.

It is your job to help the journalist understand the entire situation and you, counselor, represent the Defense (Department of).

You are biased. So are they. You are truthful. So are they.

- Dave B.



World Cup 9-Year-Olds

I coached kid’s soccer. Each season we played a very talented team and they beat us, until we prepared. This team, who we referred to as, “The World Cup 9-Year-Olds” were very good individual ball handlers. They played aggressively, with their bodies unlike any other team in the league.

One year, as the game approached, we practiced defense in depth, we did fun, no-holds-barred drills where the kids were allowed to check and tackle each other. At game day, I pulled the ref aside and told him to watch the opposing team for pushing and gave him a couple of common fouls to watch our team for.

We prepared and we won. The opposing coach was pissed and made several comments, he was not used to losing.

As a Public Affairs person, you have to know how the game will be played and you have to prepare.

You know, or can find out, the style in which the journalist will ask questions. You know where the interview will take place. You can find out what the audience’s interests are. You can practice. You can talk to the moderator or journalist ahead of time. You can make the game as fair as you can before you play it.

If you prepare, you will win.

- Dave B.



Comment on the Obvious

This post is going to sound obvious but unfortunately it needs to be written: comment on the obvious.

We can get pretty wrapped around the exact words to say. The people we provide advice to may get nervous around the media, especially if the engagement isn't planned.

Each time we write general PAG we include the phrase, "you may confirm the obvious."

That makes sense right? If the media is looking at something and they need comment, you can say, "Yup, this is happening."

We were doing some training in Texas. Some of our pyrotechnics set off a fire alarm which caused the fire department to respond. The fire department must have keyed the news. I was unprepared and the news reported about the event but said, "An Army Major would not comment." What a dumbass I was.

How about when a significant event happens in combat: we kill a notable bad guy, we achieve a significant gain or something bad happens and it's all over social media, sometimes even the host nation confirms it. Often we let the story spin, we let the narrative roll ... without us, without comment. How about, "yep, we're tracking the same reports and [forever lines]."

When the media knows something, just have a conversation.

- Dave B.

I'm Just So F'in Sorry

It works. When something bad happens, your leaders apologize, the news usually gets better and goes away.

Don't act too fast though, your reputation is at stake. Do it right.

There is a wide body of work on crisis communication, I had the great pleasure to study under crisis communicators from the financial district. Don't want to get a graduate certificate in it? No problem, here's everything you need to know the formula.

Our practical advice: When your organization fucks something up, you probably should apologize if the error meets the criteria identified in research (linked above), but you have to do it in context!

We talk about context a lot on this site.

This sucks: "We're sorry that we set the school on fire."

This is better: "We were training in the most realistic scenario available, we're sorry we set the school on fire."

This is best: "We were training in the most realistic scenario available, we're sorry we set the school on fire. In our extensive planning and rehearsals, there was no flammable material present. After all of the preparation flammable material was accidentally brought in by the school's grounds keeper."

The DINFOS purest would say that I'm trying to make excuses. I'm a realist and I'm trying to protect the reputation of our organization.

- Dave B.

I Don't Know

When talking to the media I used to try never to say, “I don't know.” I felt like it was my responsibility to know and it was my responsibility to tell the media everything they wanted to know (as long as it was appropriate).

I used to provide answers I didn't know by speculating, kind of saying some stuff I did know and other things I just thought. Real bad idea. Like the worst idea.

I graduated to saying stuff I did know and adding some forever lines. This is good but not that great for the media. Plus, when I told the media stuff I did know they would ask me more about it until I didn't know anymore. This is an OK technique but still not that great.

The thing is, if I don't know then it's probably too detailed or out of my lane to talk about anyway.

Finally now, I just say, “I don't know.” I often don't even say, “I'll find out.” The media is usually cool with that. Of course I will find out if they really need to know for their story but usually they just want to know for additional context.

Not lazy, just the truth Sally.

- Dave B.

Your Face in the Media

We gave you guidelines on when NOT to be in the media. Here is when and how you should.

Ideally, the PAO is a connector, an enabler, a strengthener never the star of the show.

Ninety-eight percent of the time, you are not the subject matter expert on the topic being discussed.

Behind the scenes, you are the expert on the relevant format (news conference, print interview or live broadcast). Your job is to identify the right expert in your organization and have them well prepared for success.

Sometimes you will put your ugly mug in front of the camera. When something shitty happens, feel free to provide the on-camera, on-the-record facts. Feel free to deliver one or all of the forever lines in order to protect the organization's reputation and put the situation in context.

Sometimes, you stand in front of a camera in a bad situation simply so no one else has to.

- Dave B.

The Leak Conversation

“Who do you think is leaking this stuff?” my boss asked.

“I don't know Sir. Maybe it was Daniel Illsburg. It could have been Steve Rogers.”

Sometimes it matters who is leaking information but most of the time it doesn't ... to me.

To be clear: Leaks are bad. They put the official communication apparatus in spin and sometimes put our mission, capabilities or troops at risk. It matters when sensitive information is leaked, and there are security professionals who will deal with it. However, to you, the organization's Public Affairs Officer, finding the source of leaks is a distraction; your job is to address and contextualize public narrative.

After a leak that affects our organization, I get to have 14 ten-minute conversations about the source. That's 140 minutes I could be doing something useful.

A bigger problem: public affairs people don't just have to have these conversations about leaks affecting their specific organization, they have to talk to anyone who wants to talk about all leaks. A few weeks ago, a soccer dad asked me about a leak related to PACOM. I haven't been in the Pacific since 2006. I have no idea who is leaking PACOM shit or why.

But chances are, those leaks aren't coming from a PAO. Yes, reporters get leaked information. Yes, PAOs talk to reporters. No, reporters aren't getting leaks from PAOs who are focused on protecting their commands and synchronizing the department's narrative ... not driving agendas and airing dirty laundry in public.

Most of the time, by examining the perspective, we can guess which agency is providing information and why, but it doesn't tangibly matter. What matters is how, if and when we respond.

So what do you do when you're asked about leaks? Have a response in your bucket of responses. Turn the conversation back to action. “Sir, this leak looks like it's coming from the United Nations Space Command, more importantly Captain Price is going to give a backgrounder with a few journalists to provide the proper background and context. In the meantime, I've talked with the J3 and the guys are making the necessary adjustments to the plan.”

“Thanks Dave, who do you think leaked this?”

“FML.”

- Dave B.



Empowerment

The Interview After Action Report

“How did I do, PAO?” the leader asked after the interview.

“I have no idea Sir,” the good PAO answers. “We’ll see when the story comes out.”

The crappy PAO picks out the 600 times when the leader repeated the command message. This PAO compliments the leader on his rapport and his effort to really get to know the reporter.

The leader wants to hear this. He wants to know whether he hit the command messages, he wants to know if he said too much or too little, he wants to know if he was articulate.

None of this matters unless our efforts affect the story. Why did you do this interview in the first place? To affect the story.

You can conduct the “best” interview in the world. You can “hit it off” with the reporter. You can show him the deep, inside greatness of your organization but if none of this affects the story than we’ve wasted our time.

Sure, sometimes we engage reporters just to foster relationships. Sometimes we talk in order to prepare for future events.

When it comes to the after action review you have for the interview, wait until the story comes out.

- Dave B.

Permission Slips

As kids, if we were going to be out of place, we needed a hall pass or permission slip -something to validate and explain our actions.

“I am in a place where I’m supposed to be.”

“I am doing something I’m supposed to be doing.” Something about this gets ingrained in us, doesn’t it?

Look around your organization. Regardless of age, rank or experience, who is hesitating to take action, searching for someone to write them a permission slip?

Great leaders talk about empowerment. Chances are, your commander cares about it to ... and wants to see more of it. Help them spread the good word.

Talk about empowerment within your organization, and highlight stories of members solving problems leaders didn’t even know existed.

You’re at the center of your organization’s communication, and you’re in a position to give your audiences their permission slips. Better yet: show them the permission slips they already have.

My favorite permission slip is the ID badge our members wear and use all day. It says, “If you can enter the building, you can solve problems inside the building.” These badges even the playing field: everyone gets one, regardless of service, status or salary.

Find what works for your organization. On your uniform, the permission slip could be your unit’s shoulder sleeve insignia or beret, but be careful to not alienate your civilians and contractors. Maybe it’s the colors, memorial or landmark your members walk past every day.

Anything tangible, visible and accessible will do.

Your people are already in the place they’re supposed to be. They’re already doing the things they’re supposed to be doing. Our job, as Public Affairs Officers, is to help them believe it.

- Dave C.

Challenge the Premise

Too often we come to conclusions based on an unproven premise. We are a tough and determined lot, we believe what we believe and if you disagree, well GFY.

We’re often wrong. It’s good to be wrong ... internally. Not so good to be wrong publicly.

As the PAO you have to challenge the premise.

The premise is the base. It’s easy to assume the premise is true and focus on the rest of the argument.

You will make your organization better if you make it a rule to challenge the premise. You don’t have to stand up in the middle of a meeting and yell. You can do it privately, with your colleagues or whatever. I like to think through our premises at the pull up bars.

Ask yourself one question specific to whatever is the topic of the day, “Is what we believe to be true, actually proven or is it assumed?”

Example Traps:

- Premise: Suicides are a result of PTSD. Dangerous conclusion, we must focus suicide prevention on those who have experienced combat.
- Premise: Our unit is undisciplined. Dangerous conclusion, we are having safety violations because we are undisciplined.
- Premise: The enemy has X intent. Dangerous conclusion, the enemy is doing A because of X.
- Premise: The enemy is dumb. The enemy is calculated. Dangerous conclusion, the enemy is acting rationally or irrationally.
- Premise: These events are correlated or these events are random. Dangerous conclusion, you can or can not effect one thing by changing the other.

The premise of one recent news article: Iran provided the Houthis this missile which was launched into Yemen, violating sanctions. The challenge, how does the U.S. know that? Answer, Saudi Arabia said so.

I don’t know what the truth is but I do know the organization was ill prepared for a reporter to challenge the premise ... probably because the PAO never did.

- Dave B.

Mo' Problems

Nobody on earth wants to hear about the problems you've identified. You don't get points for finding problems without fixing them. Why are you talking about problems instead of solving them?

People don't really want to hear about the problems you've solved, either. Those problems are solved, so there are no next steps. What do you want, credit? It's not about you; go find more problems to solve.

I only want to hear about the problems you cannot solve. This way, we can solve them together.

And if it's a problem you should have been able to solve on your own, you've just created a second new problem by getting on my radar. And you still need to go solve the first problem yourself. Don't create problems.

- Dave C.

Please Start Screwing Things Up

People want to do well. People don't like to make mistakes. Mistakes are bad ... except when you're trying to get something done.

This has been written about in business books, self help and all that jawn; but, here's the public affairs take.

If you are afraid of making a mistake you hesitate to have candid conversations with the media and public.

If you are afraid of making a mistake you don't tell your bosses that they're wrong, or right.

If you're afraid of screwing up you don't change things. If you're afraid, you keep the status quo.

Mistakes by definition, sound bad. But they're not, usually they're a sign you assumed risk in order to do what's right for your mission. Of course, they're also opportunities to learn. As a leader, you have to be aware and make your team aware of mistakes that have strategic consequence.

- Dave B.

The Fire

Joining a fraternity in college was, I truly believe, one of the top five frat-tiest things I've ever done.

Through years of bringing new pledges into the group and initiating them as full-fledged members, we had many discussions about the "NIB Fire" (NIB = Newly Initiated Brother).

The young dudes with the NIB Fire had some of the most creative ideas, invested time and energy into even the smallest events, and were just genuinely super thrilled to be a part of our group.

When the novelty of frat life was wearing down among the seniors focused on jobs and grad school, we relied on the energized sophomores to volunteer, plan parties, and recruit new members. When I was a senior focused on editing our school's paper and sleeping through PT, the NIBs were the ones making sure girls like my now-wife wanted to come to our events. Thanks, fellas.

We had to be careful not to extinguish the NIB Fire. Everyone has a limit to how many times they're told 'no' or forced to take a back seat, until they'll detach from the team and find a different creative outlet.

You're going to see people with The Fire in your job. Young folks who just joined the military. New commanders super excited to engage the media and shape the narrative. PA staff members fresh into the career field, or back from DINFOS advanced classes, or finally part of a PA office as good as yours.

Support their ideas. Empower them. Help direct their energy in way they'll find productive and gratifying.

Don't let the fire burn out.

- Dave C.

I'm in Charge

Several years ago as a young PAO, I volunteered to help escort and support reporters during one of our higher headquarters' big annual conferences, which included a multinational military capabilities demonstration in the middle of the city.

With a stable of reporters in tow, I led them across the demonstration's area toward a bridge overlooking the bay, from which they would have clear shots of the grand finale, over the water.

One road in our way was roped off for use during the demonstration, and we were just about two minutes out from getting started. I laid down the rope and started leading the media straight across.

A local cop, rightfully doing his job, ran by to point out the road had been roped off, and we weren't allowed to cross.

"Of course sir, thank you. We just need to get across this road and up the street before the demonstration starts, or these nice folks won't be able to film the event. Now seems to be a safe time to cross, especially with you right by our side," I responded respectfully.

"Well, you're going to need permission from the person in charge of this demonstration before I can let you cross."

"Oh ... well, I'm in charge of this demonstration."

"... really? You are?" he asked my 26-year-old self as bemused reporters listened in.

"Yes. Yeah, this is my demonstration. I'm in charge," I insisted. "..."

"..."

"Okay sir. Go ahead."

- Dave C.

The Two-Handed Door

My office has two doors. One is relatively normal. You need a code to open it, which is a little ludicrous because you already badge through multiple entry points in order to reach it. But whatever, it's a functioning door. We slapped a sweet poster about our internal culture on the outside, one of our favorite flags on the inside, and it's great.

The other, on the opposite end of the office, we just don't know how to open from the hallway—nobody seems to know the code.

We can open it from inside the office, which makes it a sometimes useful point of exit—it's close to the stairwell and helps avoid disrupting others when they're meeting. But (there's always a but), this door has two handles, that must be turned simultaneously. TWO HANDLES!!!

Inevitably, one of our teammates, running late for a meeting, will rush toward that door with a laptop, notebook and hot cup of coffee—only to lace the office with profanities about the two-handed door as they find a surface to drop their items so they can unlatch the thing, or simply give up and walk back around to the other exit.

We had a water bottle filler installed in our hallway. It took about a year, but we did it. And man oh man, it's glorious. You should get one, for sure. A hydrated PAO is an effective PAO.

Anyway, we bought the thing and sent the facilities team a work order to install it. Those dudes were super nice, they had to mess around with the pipes and build a funny makeshift wall out of plywood in order to mount it correctly. Success! We were drinking some sweet sweet water, 2017-style.

Except nobody painted the new plywood wall. It was mismatched against the hallway's white walls. Seemed like a natural next step, but our facilities folks are busy so I hit them up with a reminder.

Response: "That's a different one of our sections that paints. You'll have to fill out a new work order for that." A NEW WORK ORDER!!!

I mentioned our posters, which we design in-house. Another section we work with has a printer that can make huge, super high quality prints on nice paper; and since the dudes in that section understand our organization's culture, they are happy to print our products.

Now: when great posters are needed and appropriate, we make sure the message is right, the graphic designer on our team makes it look awesome, AND we make sure the printer dudes have what they need (sizes, numbers) to print them out.

Are you creating or demolishing two-handed doors in your organization?

- Dave C.

If Only

- If only people listened to me.
- If only I had more people.
- If only I had that right equipment.
- If only I had a seat at the table.
- If only my commander told me what he thought.
- If only I wasn't so busy.
- If only the staff respected me more.
- If only my commander understood public affairs.
- If only my boss didn't micromanage me.
- If only other PAOs were as good as me.
- If only the reporters asked the right questions.
- If only I could get on that patrol.
- If only I could talk to that person.
- If only the media would publish my messages.
- If only the public understood.
- If only the public cared.
- If only my website worked.
- If only I had access to the websites I need.
- If only my people were better trained.
- If only I could fire poor performers.
- If only better people applied to these positions.
- If only I had more education.
- If only they would let me.

If only you take responsibility for your own life and work, and stop making excuses.

- Dave B.

Branding

Aesthetics Matter

We've talked about your products being correct, clear and clean. Let's dig in to that last one.

I'm biased toward design because I worked with graphics and layout before I worked in writing and editing. What can I say? I'm biased toward things looking good because I like to look good.

You may have a different opinion. If you don't have an eye for design, you're working on a shoestring budget, or you're just in a time crunch, you may find yourself ignoring clean design in order to get something

Rest assured, aesthetics and design matter. If only for one reason: your organization prides itself in paying attention to details. Your equipment is well maintained, your uniforms are inspected, your formations are dress-right-dress. Your training is safe and focused, and your operations are thorough. You don't want to send a conflicting message with cheap print products or messy slideshows.

Get your brand right. Use your organization's crest unapologetically, with pride. Have all elements of your organization do the same. Dissuade peoples' tendencies to create new logos for their own initiatives or sections. Make sure you're using a high-resolution graphic of your crest, in the correct proportions. The Institute of Heraldry should be able to help you if you don't have the right files. (Note: I do wish more people adopted and used the Army Brand Guide, but it seems there's so little emphasis on this it'll never happen).

Be consistent. Use the same brand, style and tone in everything you produce. Social media accounts, press releases, PowerPoint templates, programs, posters, and the signs in your buildings. For physical products, focus on simple design and high quality (sustainable) materials that will last forever. For digital products, complement your clean branding with on-message products.

Simplify. We get it, you're not a designer and you don't have the right software or experience. So, just don't overdo it. When in doubt, cut text, put everything in 14-point Calibri, add white space, and use your organization crest as the dominant (only) image.

Want more? Read:

- Tim Harrow's *The Newspaper Designer's Handbook*
- Mario Garcia's *Pure Design*
- Nancy Duarte's *Slide:ology* and *Resonate*

- Dave C.

Ethos and Pathos about Logos

Every section in your organization wants their own unique logo designed by the PAO. Many of these sections have specific ideas of what they'd like to see in their own logo; others only know they want something in order to stand apart from the rest of the unit.

These teams' leaders consider this a legitimate request separate logos for the S4, or air guys, or Chaplain, or whatever, in theory build a sense of team within these smaller groups and establish recognition across the organization. High-performing teams want to be able to be recognized as such.

However, these requests will sidetrack from your over arching branding and culture. We've dealt with special logo requests for years. Here are a few things we've learned along the way from branding experts and artists.

- **Build the brand you have, and let your one official crest represent all of the organization's elements.** An NFL team doesn't have separate logos for the defensive line or special teams ... they all represent one team. The elements in your organization also represent one team, with one mission. Why would they want to present themselves as visibly disparate efforts? You're the command's Public Affairs Officer, so it's your responsibility to help everyone buy in to the command's official look. In some cases, such as most Brigade Combat Team PAOs, it may be your job to buy in to your higher headquarter's official look.
- **Don't bastardize, stretch or distort your logo.** Let it stand alone and speak for itself, always. Special holiday color schemes or Santa hats? Leave your logo out of it and save it for other design elements. Overlaying a doughnut graphic on your logo for a tweet on National Doughnut Day? Not in our military.
- **Beware the logo of logos.** In one image, you're not going to be able to pay homage to the ancient Spartans, the OSS, FORSCOM leadership, your commander's rank, the NCO Corps, the airborne wings, your five multinational partners, and the country in which you're operating. It'll be a jumbled mess. Going back to the NFL example, use your organization's one simple crest everywhere and let everyone love the way it represents their mission.
- **Lay off the Photoshop effects.** Your existing crest doesn't need to be 3D, or get cluttered with gradients, drop shadows, and other unnecessary styling.
- **Use the resources available.** In the U.S. Army, hit the Institute of Heraldry and the Enterprise Branding Portal

Use your one official logo, embrace it, put it somewhere everyone can find and use it, then spend the rest of your time protecting America.

- Dave C.

Junky Pens

I grabbed a pen from the cup to sign a memo. The pen was broken, the ink well had exploded. I got ink on my hand and screwed up the memo.

“Thanks Doctor Jones, DDS. You freaking clown. I never want to see you again.”

My kid’s dentist gave me a crappy pen, got ink on my hand and ruined my memo.

Your organization puts your name and logo on things. Make sure the things are quality and represent your values. Putting your logo on a broken pen isn’t good advertising.

Many people will want to use your logo in various forms. The family group will want to raise money with it, the re-enlistment folks, the commander and senior enlisted advisor want a coin and stationary.

Often commercial vendors who put logos on things have partnered with the cheapest manufacturers in the world. They specialize in producing large quantities at the lowest costs. This is what the fund raisers look for as it allows them to maximize profits.

Unfortunately, maximizing profits results in destroying your brand.

One time I worked physically near the re-enlistment office. Because of our physical proximity, we ended up working a lot together. I re-enlisted probably hundreds of Soldiers because I was the closest commissioned officer around. We helped the re-enlistment office with their branding and their message. When I left the job, they gave me a nice SOG knife with our logo on it. I had that knife for nearly 10 years until the Pentagon confiscated it. The re-enlistment office put our logo on nice things.

Different job, different recruiting office. These guys were handing out water bottles with a butchered version of our organization’s logo on it. I took the bottle home and put it through the dish washer. The bottle shrunk. Not only did it shrink, it became phallic. Hundreds of people throughout the world now have grey translucent phallic items with our logo proudly tattooed on the side. Not exactly on message.

You have to ensure that your unit’s logo, crest or seal remains represents your organization and only placed on quality.

- Dave B.

Own Signs

Our brigade headquarters was a pretty nice building. It was new, had decent landscaping, a rich history and amazing people worked there. For all the time I can remember, a sign hung behind the right side glass entry way door.

“Door Broken,” was scribed in not-so-good handwriting.

The sign had to be up for years. How many people passed through these doors? How many family members? Gold star wives, children, members of Congress and military leaders? How many people saw this sign, stating not only was our door broken, but we thought it best for staff duty to grab a sharpie and make a sign? Worse, most people tugged at the door anyway.

Signs are communication and you are the chief communicator. I liken this to the broken window effect visible cues of disorder increase the likelihood of additional disorder. Allow one crappy sign, and you should expect other crappy representations of your place.

Every single sign (or method of communication) in your organization should be controlled by you so you can ensure the message is in line with the command’s vision, the content is properly branded and looks good.

Look around your place. Is it common for the local fundraiser to tape poorly made signs all over your area? “Burger Burn!” Who’s in charge of the television monitor as you walk into your headquarters? The safety officer? The J6? Should be you.

How about the marquee that tells me not to speed, text or drink while driving? That is a method of communication. A public affairs person should be in charge of it and make sure our command message and culture is trumpeted.

Impossible? If only they would allow you. Good news. We’ve done it and you can do it too. Start with small signs, tear them down. Maybe rebrand them and put them back up ... maybe not. Find out who is providing content for all digital means and let them know you and your team have got it.

I remember one sunny Friday afternoon when my crew and I ran into our commanding general, each of us carrying an armful of torn-down signs. “What’s going on Dave?” he asked, clearly confused by the sight.

“Communicating, Sir. We’re getting all of our visual communication methods in line with the command culture,” I said, pulling from my bucket of responses. Later he talked about us “driving the holistic communication machine,” with that afternoon and signs on his mind.

Small wins will get you bigger. One sign at a time, show the people in your organization if they want to communicate broadly, you’ll help do it right and in keeping with the values which represent your organization.

- Dave B.

Make West Point Great Again

Since the early 1800s the institution we call West Point has been producing military and civilian world leaders. Set along the Hudson River on a strategic location where America sought to expel its occupiers, every inch of the campus has a story to tell. Thousands have traversed this ground since then, thousands who have led and fought and some who have died defending our country. Duty. Honor. Country,” are the rallying point of the people who serve here.

You’d think that we would encourage this amazing place to tell its own story through the vital purpose it serves, coupled with the history it enjoys. Instead, we’ve undercut these strong and important messages by affixing a spirit motto for mediocre college sports. “Go Army, Beat Navy” is strewn throughout campus. The motto is inescapable. A visitor is challenged to learn about the history without the ambush of the athletic catch phrase.

The motto will slap you in the face as you pass through stone arches that previously defended the gates to the fighting position. “Beat Navy House” is the name of the distinguished visitor quarters, originally built in 1875. “Beat Navy Tunnel” provides a thoroughfare for cadets to range campus. The commanding general’s house (another historic location) enjoys large, semi-permanent plastic signs across its face reading the motto.

Competitive athletics are an important part of our military and national culture. Be proud of the team, the program and the athletes, but let’s remember why we have military academies. Let’s recognize the historic importance of the beautiful landscape.

Be careful not to distract from the purpose, intention and history of this nationally important landmark.

The public affairs lesson sometimes the message is already there. Sometimes, you just have to let the message carry itself. Sometimes your organization’s intentions are so evident, you only have to give gentle recognition, a few nods to endorse it with your audiences. Sometimes you only have to not distract from it.

- Dave B.

Command Information



Ode to Command Information

You can change your organization.

Like anything good, command information requires you to take risk. Take it.

We've been lucky enough to be a part of organizational change, multiple times in different organizations. Here is how it can go:

Step 1: Get your command team on message:

Your commander and senior enlisted advisor likely have a schtick. They likely talk about a direction they want to take the organization; a way they want the organization to be an act. If they don't have their talking points aligned, help them. Be bold and ask, "Sir, as a commander, what's your schtick?"

Step 2: Double down on the message:

Figure out whatever medium you have and start emphasizing your message. We've done this in a few ways: articles featuring individuals or groups that exhibit the message, unit YouTube videos, old school newsletter.

My esteemed partner and I started an old school, hard copy newsletter in one of our organizations. Every Friday we distributed them throughout the organizations shitters. No shit, we put them in the shitters. Each Monday unit members came in and read about people exhibiting the command team's intentions. I remember a woman coming up to us with the newsletter in her hand with tears in her eyes because she was so touched by the

example. She became a believer that Monday morning in the bathroom.

At another place, I couldn't distribute the message via hard copy due to classification. I sent a weekly email, no design, no pictures just a weekly email describing unit members exhibiting the message. It was a sweet success.

Facebook posts, YouTube videos, tweets, announcements, command emails whatever ... double down on the message.

Step 3: Destroy anything that degrades the message:

You might have to break some rules. I walk softly around my place and carry a big stick. Sometimes I carry a drill. We literally rip down, take down, dismantle anything that doesn't support the command's message. This is really fun. If we hear someone say something publicly that doesn't coincide with the message, we teach them. We take control of every screen, every sign, anything that has a message on it.

Guidelines:

- **Your permission is the command message.** Stay aligned with the message and never seek additional approval.
- **Just do it.** No need to announce what you're doing before you do it. It's a lot easier to stall a train that hasn't left yet than to stop a speeding train.
- **Do it well.** Don't let the message be distracted by your shitty work.

In this case, you don't speak for the command, you cite the command's speech. Don't let yourself get caught acting like you're the commander, you're just conveying what the command said and wants.

- Dave B.



Copy Editing: Who gives a shit?

Not me. Frankly no one gives a shit whether your article has been edited. I know they teach this at DINFOS and I agree PAOs should know something about AP style. But please, stop worrying about commas.

Worry instead about prose, content and context. Worry about the larger implications of the information you are about to release. There are so many things to think about that have nothing to do with subject-verb agreement ... whatever that mean.

Pro-tip: If and only if your office is the release authority, designate one person to do a final copy edit. If you're sending the release to the post paper let them edit. If you're sending to higher headquarters for release, let them do it. Having just one edit avoids time consuming repeated changes based on style and opinion. Controlling the edit allows the appropriate people to focus on the appropriate things.

- Dave B.



Make Photos Useful

I'm not a photographer and I don't claim to know much about photos. Many of you think I should. Good news, I don't care. Bad news, we're wasting time by batching and sharing useless photos.

If we send our higher headquarters or the public a haystack and tell them that there are likely a few needles in the stack, we are wasting time and making it very unlikely that our audiences will engage.

Here is a summary of photo guidance I got from a great PA leader months ago:

- 1. Photos must be attributable** to an official source on the battlefield today, photos and photographers are as abundant as hipsters at Starbucks. Unless the Department of Defense can attribute the photo, it's fairly useless no matter how great they are. In this great guidance, the leader agreed to even attribute to non-DoD/Coalition forces with permission.
- 2. It is the source's/sender's responsibility to search images and review metadata to ensure it is public domain.** Don't want to reveal the specific/grid location of the photograph? Clean it first.
- 3. Image must be high enough resolution to publish.** "Our partner forces took these great photos that were included in the J3's storyboard and the boss wants them released." Good. Too bad you can't cut and paste these from the PowerPoint slide and send them for release.
- 4. The picture must demonstrate messaging requirements.** Cool photos are cool but not to be added to the haystack unless they further the mission. Save the cool, non-messagy photos for your scrap book.

5. **Remember propriety.** The battlefield is messy. Partner forces often send graphic images. No thanks, not for publication. Propriety is a judgement call and applies beyond battlefield carnage. Should your mom or 7 year old kid see these photos? If not, probably keep them for the storyboard.
6. **Consider adverse perspective.** Before you hit send, ask yourself, “What’s the worst possible context and cutline Time Magazine could associate with this image?” You may know the right thing is happening but is that apparent in the photo? Could it be misconstrued? I like to consider how the Vietnam era anti-military protester would look at these photos.
7. **Send packages.** Tell a story with a set of photos while ensuring each stands on its own. There is no good in batching and sending photos one disjointed send at a time. Be patient and send your higher headquarters the set, together.

Use these guidelines to save everyone time and make your photo sets more effective. Just cull down your sets bro. Only send the photos that pass the test. Tag and catalogue the others so you can find them in a pinch. Now go get ‘em. You do great work.

- Dave B.

Where Does Content Come From?

The short answer: everywhere.

A colleague, who is also a blogger, asked me where we get “so much” content for MaxDisclosure. (This surprised me, because we’re figuring this out as we go, but do manage to pull together 3-4 posts each week.)

Here are the unwritten guidelines we follow; apply them to your own blog, command information program, or other creative endeavor.

- **Start with ideas.** Grab a white board with your team and budget out your content for the next 30 days, or 90 days, or year. Of course, the ideas are the easy part, right? We have lists of blog post topics we never have and never will write. Before we started MaxDisclosure, we made a list of 100 post ideas to see if there were enough ideas to keep this going. Today, I don’t know where that list is, and would be surprised if we’ve used even 10 of those ideas.*
- **Write about the ideas you’re excited about.** When you only write about the ideas you’re excited about, you don’t need to over-systemize or schedule time to write to the point it becomes a chore. You won’t need to find time to blog when the ideas are intriguing, because the time will find you.
- **Keep it brief.** When words stop coming to you, simply stop writing. Only put effort into introductions or conclusions when they come naturally. Your content can be whatever you want it to be, so don’t feel beholden to making three specific points or following a particular format.
- **Ship the content you’re excited about.** When writer’s block sets in, table the discussion and move on to something else. Bounce a draft against someone you trust. My favorite rule of thumb: when you’ve got a solid Part 1, ship Part 1. If the rest of the series is going to come later, it will. If not, at least you put something out there.

That’s it. Like everything on this blog, and in life, it’s common sense.

** If the ideas are the easy part, then why do so many PAOs suck at it, and struggle to churn out stories? On a previous deployment, I was disappointed a 4-member Public Affairs Detachment was unable to produce one command information product for each day of the deployment (that’s less than two articles, videos, photo galleries, profiles, etc. per person, per week). Get out of the office, get to know your people and what they’re doing, and tie those stories to your commander’s top messages.*

- Dave C.

Start a Weekly Newsletter

I'm not usually one to advocate for more command information. PAOs spend too much time creating content to talk to ourselves, rather than plugging into the mission and talking about something important.

On the other hand, you should start a weekly newsletter for your organization. Especially if you are a new PAO or are rekindling a defunct Public Affairs program a weekly newsletter will do a few important things for your organization:

- Shove command priorities down peoples' throats.
- Announce the Public Affairs Office makes professional, tangible things on the cheap.
- Remind people of stories' power. Entertain and delight your organization's members.

Keep it short. We went with a 200-250 word max article on the front, and another 150-200 word column from one of our units or staff directorates on the back. You can pull together a big feature photo, Q&A with staff leader, or relevant Army.mil article to fill up the rest of the space. Since you're a busy PA shop, you'll have more trouble trimming content than finding it.

Make the design simple, and professional without spending hours on the design process. Since you care about branding and a professional image, you won't take the shortcut to use Publisher, PowerPoint, or any Microsoft product. Use Adobe InDesign, the professional standard, but there's no reason the design needs to be complex or flashy. Let the content speak for itself. This is a weekly reflection of your command's relentless focus on mission. This is not the PAO Newsletter or an opportunity for you to justify your existence.

Print it in color on cardstock paper. People like tangible products. Don't spend time designing a 8.5" x 11" portrait PDF just so people can read it through a 20" x 15" landscape lightbulb. The Internet is fine for some things, but nothing beats sending a printed document home to Mom.

Put it in the shitters. No joke, Dave B. and I bought document holders and stuck them in every toilet stall in our seven-story headquarters building. Every Friday night when most folks had left, we walked the halls, cleaned the trash and toilet paper rolls out of each holder, and added a couple copies of the week's newsletter. Of course, we had a few set out at the main entrance, too.

Absolutely don't make it the only, or even the main, thing your team does. Your weekly newsletter should be a byproduct of your relentless commitment to mission and lasting impact. When your commander asks you what the PAO team did in the past week, your answer should not be "well, we made the newsletter." The newsletter happens because you make so many other things happen.

- Dave C.

Social Media



Social Media and You

People ask me. They say, “Hey Dave, what about Social Media?” What about it? It’s a cesspool.

I don’t have a point. Here are some disconnected thoughts:

Cool Graphs Make You Look Smart But They’re Dumb.

I fondly recall the days when I briefed my social media illiterate boss on our booming Facebook stats.

Let’s be honest, sometimes you need to sling a sexy graph in front of your organization to show them that you’re the man. That’s cool and it works.

“Sir, last week we had 3,000 views on our Facebook photo of the week.”

“Wow,” he said confidently, “keep up the great work.” He made a note to himself to go home and tell his wife because she likes Facebook.

As a PAO you’re often the social media dude. You’re the organization’s goto person when something happens in the wild world of likes. We know its more important to communicate about effects, not efforts; keep reading and decide what you can do with social media.

Between us PAOs the easy stats mean nothing. “We have 6K followers.” That means nothing. “Our tweet received 67 likes.” Still nothing. “There were 43 reflections on this post.” Meaningless.

To quote one of my favorite coup strategists, “How many polar bears have you saved this morning by clicking Like on a Facebook page? Not really.” Spoken with Russian accent, his point is that people are more important than social media followers.

PAO: The Social Media Man

If you really want your organization to understand social media, give them a class on what all this shit means. If you don’t know, learn.

Once you learn you’ll likely be pretty disappointed on what your stats actually mean; likely nothing in terms of effectiveness.

Create Less Choices

The less pages you have, the better. The better you will control your message, the more you connect to your audience, and the less content you need. Our poor unit and family members now have to follow the post’s page, the division’s page, the brigade’s page, the division commander and sergeant major’s page, same for the command team at brigade, the family page for each. Oh man, it’s too much.

Decide which level you want to connect with your audience and drive traffic to that. I personally recommend brigade level (O6) but it depends on your organization and audience.

Creating the Flock

On the bright side, the one thing more and active followers gets you is a group of passive supporters. Use this when you’re organization has a crisis. The couple thousand sheep following your unit’s Facebook page will likely prove to be a small alliance when your organization is in trouble.

So should your organization be on social media? Yep. Every channel. Should you communicate on social media? For sure. It’s another medium to communicate and you need as many as you can get. It’s especially effective for some audiences and especially ineffective for others. It’s like burpees, they suck but they must be useful for something. Embrace it.

It’s not all useless ... I guess.

- Dave B.



A Box of Vegetables

We have a small garden in our backyard where we grow tomatoes and stuff. We're moving so I wasn't planning on planting anything. My garden was going to be left empty. As we prepared the house to sell, our realtor pointed at the garden box and asked, "What's this?"

"It's a vegetable garden," I said.

"No, it's not," she said, "unless you have vegetables growing."

She's right. Without vegetables, it's just a large empty wooden box in our backyard. Even though we won't be here to 'harvest' we planted vegetables to make our garden a garden.

As a PA shop, you need to make sure you are using the assets you have.

You can have a social media account but unless you give it content, it's not a social media account. Your audience will wonder why you have it and judge you when your most recent content is 2 years old.

You can have a photographer, but unless you're taking and shipping photos, you don't have a photog. When was the last time your video guy shipped a video to your audiences? Shipping is the only thing that matters ... it's the veggies.

You can be a public affairs person or shop, but unless you're doing public affairs you're just an empty wooden box in the backyard.

- Dave B.

My Boss Loves Twitter

My boss doesn't tweet a lot ... or ever, but Twitter is one place where he likes to get his news.

We listen.

Three days a week my dudes brief to inform the command on the information environment. We focus on conveying news topics that affect our resources, approvals, authorities or operational support. We are the news experts and therefore can efficiently explain the topics in the information environment that affect those things.

My boss gets much of his news from Twitter. So do we.

He reads BBC, Al Jazeera and the major western newspapers. So do we. He follows regional locals to get an on-the-ground perspective. So do we.

Here's the thing: we don't read those things in order to sound like we know what we're talking about, or to look good or whatever. Reading the same thing my boss does gives us an opportunity to expand the conversation.

Often PAOs feel failure when their boss reads an article they didn't. It's true, you did fail. The failure is not in the fact that you missed the article, it's in the fact that you missed the opportunity.

When the boss and our team both read the most recent BBC article that we care about, we have the opportunity to tease out this particular author's perspective. We can read and discuss other articles related to the same topic. We can use our shared knowledge of this article to open up discussion on topics important to our command.

Go on the offensive. Understand what your boss is reading and read it. Ask him about it first. "Hey boss, did you see that article on BBC about the online activists who are raging against the Syria's chemical weapons strikes? There's more to the story. Western journalists picked up on it and asked DoD for comment. Easy response, but thought you should know, the issue has made it to the Pentagon."

Who's on Twitter reading BBC now bitch?

- Dave B.

82nd Airborne rips into Charlottesville man wearing hat, giving Nazi salute



"Anyone can purchase that hat. Valor is earned." the official Twitter account of the 82nd Airborne tweeted Monday, August 13, 2017. (<https://twitter.com/82ndAIRBORN>)

<http://abc11.com/politics/82nd-rips-into-man-wearing-hatgiving-nazi-salute/2310484/>

Bias toward Engagement

One day, your organization will be forced into a public quandary that you want nothing to do with. A Soldier will be killed at a range. One of your leaders will tweet a dick pic. Something will drive public scrutiny in your direction. Hell, maybe a white supremacist will wear your unit's logo at a Nazi rally.

Experience tell us many commanders will hang back, and hope the situation blows over quickly and painlessly. Maybe the public will move on to another outrage -in which case the crack in your unit's reputation is set. Maybe in time, you (and the JAG, Chaplain, Command Team, higher headquarters, civilian HR office, Safety Officer, IO team, CA dude, and Motor Pool folks) will generate the perfect statement to address the problem by saying nothing at all ... in which case your unit's reputation and public affairs legacy will go down as slow and gutless.

Others commanders will consider their organization's values, and the things their key audiences need to hear about those values. Furthermore, they will trust their Public Affairs leaders to engage when engagement is required.

I am not an 82nd member or alumnus, but you have to recognize good Public Affairs when you see it:

Why we like this series:

- They focused on values.
- They honored their history.

- Their response was timely. Max disclosure, min delay, anyone?
- Furthermore, they were persistent, and kept the conversation going throughout the day.
- They avoided politics. This was a discussion of who they are and what they stand for nothing else.
- They engaged. The key point is they went past just a bias toward action. The organization chose to identify and directly reply to those questioning their values.

Is there still a Keith L. Ware award for social media programs?

- Dave C.

E-mail



E-mail: Our Least Preferred Method of Communication

E-mail is my least preferred method of communication. Make it yours, too.

To be clear: I use e-mail all day, every day. I recognize its role in the modern workplace, so I manage my inbox like a grown-up and don't talk about the number of e-mails I've received in any given period of time.

But, give me a break, e-mail is the worst.

You've heard us say it before: it's never, ever about you. However, e-mails are inherently about you and the things you want to say and the information you want to get off your desk as soon as possible. An e-mail recipient can't chime in halfway through a message to say, "wait, this doesn't make sense to me, can you explain?"

Know e-mail will always be a part of your life, but treat it like your least preferred method of communication. Your last option. Burger King is my least preferred lunch option, on post. Does that mean I've never been to Burger King? I wish, but false. This just means I've got to rule out all my preferred options before deciding on becoming a human ball of grease and misery for about 24 hours.

When my co-workers choose to e-mail me about work, I hope they understand this is the equivalent of inviting me to meet for lunch at Burger King. I might say yes, but I'm not going to feel good about it, and our relationship will never be the same.

Here's how and when I use e-mail:

- **When the verbiage matters.** Acceptable. We deal in the business of precise communication, so when other spokespeople need to understand and repeat your statements' specific wording, send it over e-mail (but not as an attachment.)
- **When the audience is wide.** Also acceptable, because we deal in the business of flat communication. As much as I'd like to, I can't talk over the phone to each member of a dozen-plus PAO network because there's no way they'd all receive the same talking points or be in a position to connect with one another.
- **When the timing is off.** This is natural, because we deal in the business of fast yet transregional communication. Know your colleagues' general work schedules, and make sure they have important information for the start of their workday, whenever that is in their time zone.
- **When I need a record of the communication** such as an official response to cover my ass, or a direct task to micromanage a teammate. Lame, and rare, because we should try to only work with professionals who can take action without formal requests and records.
- **When I want to coordinate a time and place for one of my more preferred methods of communication.** Because I'm respectful of others' time and don't want to interrupt busy people if it's not necessary.
- **When something is not my problem ...** in direct violation of my selfprescribed job description. If I'm not picking up the phone or walking over to your office, this project is probably not on my task tracker.
- **When I'm not prepared.** If I don't know enough about a topic to talk about it face to face with a colleague, I'm tempted to stall over e-mail as I get a sense for the recipient's agenda, while frenetically digging for information.
- **When I know e-mail is the recipient's most preferred method of communication.** See, it's not all about me and the things I prefer.
- When I'm stressed or being lazy. Sad but true, I send more e-mails when I'm at my worst and make more phone calls when I'm at my best.
- **When I don't want a response.** Not applicable to every situation, but if I'm ready for the conversation to end, I'm happy to send an e-mail.

A to-do list bullet or calendar reminder to "call (or visit) so-and-so" is less time consuming, and in the end more effective, than blasting off that e-mail.

- Dave C.

Manage Your E-mail Like a Grown-Up

Microsoft Outlook works for you, not the other way around. Never let yourself become a slave to your inbox.

"Just digging through e-mail" is yet another thing staff officers say that commanders don't. As we've established, only slobs feel the need to announce the high numbers of e-mails they receive. In fact, we've all worked with people who compete over it, as if that's a reflection of one's importance or effectiveness.

E-mail is the reality in which we live, but it shouldn't be a burden and it's definitely not an excuse for poor or missed communication. If your e-mail accounts are managing your day, then chances are you need to upgrade your work habits:

- Know the top place you'll run into important people, and have a useful reason to be physically present at that place at least once each day. For us, that's the hallway outside the JOC, frequented by senior leaders, their aides and admins, and other players on their way to and from meetings. "Hey Dave, did you see that e-mail about suchand-such?" ... "Not yet, but let's talk about it right now. What's up?" When you get back to your desk, many of your e-mails will have been actioned and rendered irrelevant.
- Abolish your fancy hierarchy of .PST folders for various topics and senders. That's right, you've invested hours dragging and dropping each e-mail into one of these folders ... or creating new folders for unique subjects. And you've also invested hours hunting through these same folders, not sure if you filed that media query response you need to revisit under "Live Fire Death" or "Range 77" or "1 BN" or "1st Battalion" or "Fayetteville Observer" or "June 2010" or "06 2010" or "Media" or "Random" ... or others. You need two folders in Outlook: "Respond" and "Archive" because all that matters is whether or not you need to take an action. Beyond that, hit "search" in Outlook and find what you need within "Archive" in a matter of seconds. [If you're feeling frosty, a third, "Read" folder is acceptable as long as you can keep it empty.
- Schedule time against the task. This is the most Lifehackery thing I hope I ever blog, so don't make me repeat it. Get into work 15-20 minutes earlier and attack your e-mail with conviction. While others are just rolling into the lot, you'll be launching into the day's clear priorities, not fighting off drive-bys so you can sort through SITREPS. And if you've been out of the office for a week? Take a Sunday morning to empty that inbox; you'll set yourself up for a painless Monday, and be home in time for church.

Important e-mail management tips from How Google Works, a MaxDis must-read:

- “Clean out your inbox constantly. How much time do you spend looking at your inbox, just trying to decide which email to answer next? How much time do you spend opening and reading emails that you have already read? Any time you spend thinking about which items in your inbox you should attack next is a waste of time. Same with any time you spend rereading a message that you have already read (and failed to act upon).
- “When you open a new message, you have a few options: Read enough of it to realize that you don’t need to read it, read it and act right away, read it and act later, or read it later (worth reading but not urgent and too long to read at the moment). Choose among these options right away, with a strong bias toward the first two. Remember the old OHIO acronym: Only Hold It Once. If you read the note and know what needs doing, do it right away. Otherwise you are dooming yourself to rereading it, which is 100 percent wasted time.
- “If you do this well, then your inbox becomes a to-do list of only the complex issues, things that require deeper thought (label these emails “take action,” or in Gmail mark them as starred), with a few “to read” items that you can take care of later. To make sure that the bloat doesn’t simply transfer from your inbox to your “take action” folder, you must clean out the action items every day. This is a good evening activity. Zero items is the goal, but anything less than five is reasonable.”

Otherwise you will waste time later trying to figure out which of the long list of things to look at.

- Dave C.

Always Respond

There is nothing I hate more than emailing someone and not getting a response. It especially irritates me when that someone is a fellow PAO, a fellow communicator. Sometimes I joke that they could at least tell me to “shut up” or “F off,” but no response is unacceptable. It’s like a big “F you” for the work you put in to contact them, solve an issue, prepare and polish language for them, etc. After all, it does not take long to respond.

Have you ever received an email that says, “Did you get this?” It’s super annoying, but whose fault is it for this annoying email? Think about it.

One of my favorite journalism professors and one of the greatest teachers I ever encountered, the late and great Matt Duffy, told his students that they better be the last ones to respond to an email from him and that we needed to apply this to all of our communication because we are professional communicators. I took this to heart. Why wouldn’t I? This guy graded my papers and I was paying him to teach me stuff. I should listen.

Acknowledging that you received information, are working on something, etc. shows that you care. And guess what, that is half the battle, or sometimes more, in our career field.

How often have you heard from fellow staff officers that “the previous PAO did not seem to care”? Don’t be that PAO. Acknowledge receipt, communicate and take action. Plus, following up is another opportunity for your boss to see your name and how you contribute to the fight. It only takes a minute.

- Carly C.

Reply All for All

Know that guy who accidentally hits Reply All on an e-mail chain, and sends all recipients into an uproar?

We prefer the guy who purposely hits Reply All to go wide and share useful information.

E-mail sucks, but we know many people prefer to use it, even though they shouldn't. Participate and make those conversations more useful.

- **Know your audience.** Before dropping the Reply All bomb, do a quick CC: line inspection. Who are the senior folks? Who from your higher headquarters, or outside your organization?
- **Message this audience.** When you key the mic during your Command and Staff meetings, you do so with something the entire organization needs to hear you say. Reply All is your virtual conference room, so offer a communications-focused perspective for everyone to keep in mind.
- **In your note, acknowledge up front you are abusing Reply All on purpose.** “Team, using Reply All here with some insight on the messaging strategy,” or “Adding Bobo, Petunia and the XCOM PA staff to this traffic for their insights. Here’s what we know now.”
- **“But what if I say something wrong and lose credibility?”** Correct yourself as soon as possible, and keep the conversation rolling. Or rely on someone else to correct you. When you aren't sure about something call out the person on the CC: line who will know the right answer.
- **Always, always, always, always include your own team.** Condition all organization members to never, ever send an e-mail to you unless your team distribution list is on the CC: line.

E-mail sucks, but since we're on it, might as well make sure everyone knows everything.

- Dave C.

Signature Blocks. Use 'em

What message are you sending when someone wants to call you, they search for your number via Outlook email, and they cannot find your phone number because you sign your emails “Thanks! v/r Capt C”? (HINT: Not a very good one.)

There are already people in your command who think they can do your job, PAO. If someone needs you, do not make it hard for them to contact you.

Programs like Outlook are great and will automatically put your signature block in your emails. Technology is crazy helpful.

We are in the bidness of communicating. Communicate that you want others to communicate with you. Let them know how to contact you. Use a signature block. It's that simple.

We give our new members a mandate to use signature blocks: “Make it easy for others to find you. You want people to call you back, not e-mail you back, so make sure they know your phone number. Don't expend precious space and credibility on quotes, fonts and colors.”

- Carly C.

I Hope This Helps

I often get emails that end with, “I hope this helps.”

I hope you hope it helps or else why did you write the email?

It would have been more helpful if we had face to face conversation. In absence of face to face, you should have called. There are rules for this. That would have helped.

Another email generally isn't helpful, your helpfulness isn't helpful.

Let's talk about communication. If we must send an email, we're going to be sure it helps. We only email when we have to and we know it will be an effective way to communicate.

Maybe you can start ending our emails with, “I know this helps.” I know this helps, MaxDis.

- Dave B.

Be Better

Worthy Goals

I get to work with a lot of great people. A colleague and friend made a resolution. On a post-it note he wrote, “Be Better” and stuck it to his desk.

Some would take this as cute or tongue-in-cheek. He meant it. In 2018, he will be better; and therefore, so will we.

Remember, you can do whatever you want. You know what to do.

If only you did it. Be better.

- Dave B.

Execute the Basics to Perfection

Teams and units become elite, and develop absolute trust, when they execute the basics to perfection.

Combat soldiers must be able to hit a target with their weapon and communicate for understanding in chaotic situations. Major league players can throw the ball fast and straight to get a double play.

Likewise, staff teams and PAOs had better be precise and consistent with their simplest tasks. Commanders need to trust their Public Affairs team to work without oversight.

You and your team may have good ideas, strong relationships, and access to opportunities ... but those will crumble over time without the proper foundation. You don't have time or credibility to waste on missed deadlines; recycled/plagiarized language; misspelled words and names; off-message headlines or leads; or passive or incoherent language. As a PAO, you'd better know and share what's in the news, understand your organization's mission and structure, and write useful and informed public affairs guidance.

DINFOS teaches you the basics in a few weeks. If you want to be elite, come out of training ready to get the basics right, every time. Talk about and rehearse the basics with your team often. Since you're a leader, don't just practice the basics with your office or unit; figure out how to measure and validate those tasks.

Your ability (and empowerment) to do work that is different, better, and special, hinges on your ability to execute the basics to perfection.

- Dave C.

The Problem with Fatness

I hate to be so harsh, but it's important to say. If you are a public figure for an organization where fitness is very important to success, you shouldn't be fat.

I don't necessarily need to say anymore, but just to be clear:

Your boss likely already thinks you are a "soft skill" or "leaf eater." Don't encourage this idea by being dumpy and out of shape.

Can you imagine doing a press conference while fat? It happens. Related: part of your organization's internal and external message is that fitness is important and the organization is fit to fight. You'd be somewhat of an oxymoron.

Eat better, work out more.

- Dave B.

Your Day

"I actually think about everything I do, all the time, all day."

-Someone

Here is some advice a wise command sergeant major once gave to me, "Sir, you should plan your day."

Beautiful advice on its own. He helped me break it down.

Start with NOT looking at your calendar or email. First, think of your big goals (in life and work); how you want to be. Those items shouldn't change often and should inform how you plan.

After you've taken a few minutes to reflect on how you want to be, consider what you want to get done. This is the quadrant 2 stuff.

Only after working through the important stuff above, think about what you have to do. These items are meetings you have to go to and deadlines you have to make. Tasks that should be tracked.

In life and at work you either make things happen or you let things happen. If you plan your day like CSM says you'll be surprised at how much time you have to concentrate on the important things: investing in your people, investing in your organization, investing in yourself and reading MaxDis.

You should make the things happen that are important to you and your organization. Free yourself from the chains of your calendar.

- Dave B.

You Know What To Do

- You know you should just draft the release instead of talking about it.
- You know you should eat less and do PT more.
- You know you should give your subordinates feedback.
- You know you should be more candid with your leaders.
- You know you should read more about your profession.
- You know you should listen to others' input with an open mind.
- You know you should make up your mind.
- You know you should take more responsibility.
- You know you should trust your peeps and empower them.
- You know you should come in to work earlier.
- You know you should pick up the phone instead of email.
- You know you should speak up when you have something to say ... even in a meeting (oooh).
- You know you should think before you respond.
- You know you should put the camera down.
- You know you should plan to win.
- You know you should start with end in mind.
- You know you should go on offense now, vice defense later.
- You know you should be more positive. You know you should.

So fucking do it.

- Dave B.

I'll Keep This Short

1. Answer questions and tell stories.
2. As soon as you can.
3. With the information you have at the time.

- Dave C.

Trust Your Gut

Trust your gut. Those instinctual vibes that occur in your brain and which you feel at your core. You'll be happy you did.

Granted, the saying itself may seem trite to some, and really, what does it mean, you might ask.

I'll tell you what I think.

Sometimes it is as simple as asking the question that pops into your head as a current or future operation, communications plan, or public affairs guidance is discussed. Doesn't mean you support that position, but it is a question that has to be asked so be prepared to explain why you are asking, whether to the Commander, the J3, or a fellow PAO. At other times, it means acting on something you learned, either through real world experience or in the school house. Still other times, it may be picking up the phone on an ostensible whim to connect with someone with whom you have an important relationship and neglected too long.

One pertinent example from experience (and the school house). In August 2016, I had arranged a telephonic interview with the Commander (a four-star) and NPR's Morning Edition. NPR had pitched the point of the interview as getting to know what the four-star, sub-unified Command was all about so Morning Edition's audience could learn more. What a great opportunity to reach a fairly broad, educated audience, we thought.

We'd talked with the producer and an assistant and were scheduled to speak with the slated Morning Edition host about what we all wanted out of the interview and some ground rules one primary stipulation being that we could not discuss a particular hot topic at the time due to classification and policy involved ('you can ask, that's your job, but we won't be able to talk about it; so, let's not waste time'). They agreed. I never spoke with the host (and the Commander never had a pre-game get-to-know you call with the host, which is a great approach). Hey, I trusted the host and the approach NPR generally seemed to take in my experience and the Command agreed to go ahead.

Regardless, at the last minute, a different host (a newer one) was slated due to an apparent conflict in the timing. The hot topic we could not discuss was also freshly hot that week. We could have pulled out (this is a post for another time), but went ahead.

The day of the interview, the Colonel to whom I was the deputy introduced the Commander and the interview over the speaker phone was about to proceed. There was a split second before it kicked off in earnest in which I was going to review the ground rules.

It buzzed in my gut and head, speak up to provide a reminder: 'as discussed, you can ask about this hot topic, but we cannot discuss, so let's not waste time,' I could have said.

Then, I thought, 'well, the Colonel has taken the lead and although I was the action officer, we're all professionals, it will be fine.'

The particular Morning Edition host began the interview with a question on the topic we could not discuss. O.k., fine. The Commander answered transparently and forthrightly. The interviewer then asked again in a different way. He went on to continue to ask throughout the interview.

It did not go well.

When NPR ran the story the following morning, the piece became mostly about the hot topic and the host had the gall to state that the Commander was not particularly forthcoming. This was not what I used to with NPR's approach (again, my experience) and there was almost nothing said about the Command overall, which was supposed to have been the point.

Did the NPR host not get the word from his staff, did he believe the sizzle of the hot topic was worth more than the relationship?

Ridiculous. And avoidable.

Had I reviewed the agreed upon ground rules as the interview started, the host might still have taken the frankly lame approach he did. But, the Command could have benefited from a re-stated, on-the-record review of said agreed upon approach. It may have changed the tone to the Command's benefit, opening a more natural moment to speak up again to say, 'hey, let's move on, because we all agreed this is not a good use of time.' Maybe the host wasn't tracking the ground rules at all and the entire thing could have been entirely different.

Missed the opportunity and the Commander, Command, and DoD was put in a poor position at the moment. On a personal, professional note, I temporarily lost some hard earned credibility.

I earned back the trust and the Command kicks ass, so it moved on unscathed. Still. Speak up.

Trust your gut.

- Joe H.

The Advice of A Command Sergeant Major Be #3

A great Command Sergeant Major says he sees people exist in three general ways:

- People who know something is happening, have some ideas about it and may or may not take action to contribute.
- Some people who don't know what's happening.
- People who see opportunities and make things happen, even if it's not their job or they weren't directed to do so.

Which one are you?

Public affairs people aren't often directed to take action (break glass in case of emergency). Until we've built your reputation, public affairs people rarely are asked for input on organizational actions which don't include specific public affairs equities.

A public affairs person has unique communication-focused perspective and is placed in the organization where we can see opportunity and take it. Not only can you be a #3 guy or gal you can move others to do the same. You can highlight opportunities for your fellow staffers to get involved. Be #3. Now go and do likewise.

- Dave B.

Don't Be a Slob

- Keep a set of professional civilian clothes at work.
- Mirror, razor, comb and mouthwash, for emergencies.
- Whiskey glasses, for emergencies and Fridays.
- Make problems go away.
- Let people see you exercising around the place you work.
- Know what your boss and team members are doing.
- Be efficient.
- If you have a bunch of papers on your desk, file them in folders or scan them into your email.
- Don't leave Facebook up on your computer, even if you're using it for work stuff.
- Offer coffee to your guests.
- Know what time it is in the three most relevant time zones.
- Get some plants. Water them.
- Take responsibility for mistakes, and fix them.
- Use the phone before you send any email.
- Talk face to face before you pick up the phone.
- Don't put anything negative in writing.
- Start with why.
- Curse unapologetically, or not at all.
- Clean up cockroach corpses.
- Don't set an out-of-office e-mail if you're going to be checking your e-mail.
- Assume everyone in your organization belongs there.
- Carry a sturdy metal coffee cup, even if it's empty.
- Carry a notebook, even if you know you won't take any notes.
- Order pizza if you're making people work late
- Clean your office every Friday.
- Always offer background and context.
- Be proactive.
- Take critical feedback and get better.
- Get to work with a cushion of time but get to meetings right on time.
- Speak so that people can hear you.
- Disagree.
- Seek and take responsibility.
- Do things just because you're told you can't.
- Offer visitors a drink.
- Don't make excuses.

- Dave C.



Don't Be a Slob, Part 2

- Use the phone, but not voicemail.
- If you bold or highlight text in an email to draw attention to the important points, you've written too much.
- Always always always have something significant to report.
- If colleagues made bingo cards about conversations with you frequent phrases, word choice, body language would you be proud of what was on it?
- Quote great movies and songs; when your audience misses the reference, shrug and move on without lingering on the topic.
- Quote the Secretary of Defense; when your audience misses the reference, educate them.
- A conference call is a great time for pushups.
- Drinks in the office? We're on board, but everyone present has been offered a glass, you've toasted to your mission, and the door is open because you've got a spare glass for whomever drops by.
- Books.
- Dumb meeting? Leave, or stay and force yourself to write down three new facts to pass back to your team.
- Read all the news, all on your own time.
- Be self sufficient. Your subordinates have a job and it's not to help

you do yours.

- Your boss should want face time with you more than you want face time with him.
- TDY is not for fucking off.
- Worry about yourself.
- If you're in the mood to motivate and empower: engage.
- If you know your mood will lead to counter productive engagement: don't engage.
- Solutions.
- Ideas.
- Be good at your job first, then help the rest.
- Stay properly caffeinated.
- Never refuse a piece of gum.
- Try hard not to have offensive breath.
- Look people in the face.
- Don't touch.
- Never sit on someone's desk.
- Time is our only limited resource; patience is not. Understand the subtle, yet crucial, difference.
- Shake hands firmly.
- When we can't hear you, you don't get to talk.
- Have some self control.
- Give credit to your team.
- Literally everyone says literally.
- Don't believe the words on your evaluation report.
- Never cook fish in the microwave.

- Dave C.

The Way Professionals Communicate

Only communicate in order to enable action.

If you're about to communicate for anything other than action, stop and wonder why. Even informing or making someone aware of something enables action as long as the information is useful.

Communication which doesn't enable action is likely an intrusive waste of my fucking time. And time is my only limited resource.

Face to face communication is the best form. There are loads of physical and emotional cues that are exchanged.

Understanding is best achieved face to face. Understanding enables action.

We email so much. Stop emailing. Email is for bitches. Do this exercise: Can I talk to the person face to face? No? Can I call them? No? Can it wait? No. Then email, only as a last resort.

Do you have to email? From SMA Daley, never (NEVER) do anything negative over email.

You think you need PowerPoint? You likely need a whiteboard instead. If not a whiteboard, maybe you 2 or 3 need large printed slides that you can talk about (discuss). We all whine and complain about PowerPoint and then lazily and hypocritically default to it ourselves. Let's be better together and kick it to the curb.

Everything starts with communication, and nothing happens until you do. Get smart, you have to be your organization's expert.

- Dave B.

Confidence is Contagious

The one quote of the day from Air Force Officer Training School I will never forget: "Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence" by Vince Lombardi.

I apply it to everything I do. It's a better way of saying "fake it til you make it."

A lack of confidence can radiate from a person in different ways, making people question you, your abilities, and affecting your organization. Some show a lack of confidence by not speaking up, whispering when they have to say something and just sounding lame. Some, like me, just keep talking until I get someone to tell them "yeah, got it" just to make it stop.

As a young lieutenant, because no matter if you are about to pin on captain, you are still a young lieutenant, I was given some of the best advice from an Army major who at that point I had worked with for a total of 24 hours. At that moment, I lacked confidence because I was young, new, nervous and unsure of my new job, I was trying to explain something to him when the words were just not coming out right. A minute into me babbling, I was still not at the bottom line of why I was taking up his time.

This major said something I will never forget. He told me to stop talking and to figure out what I was going to say because he was only going to listen for the next 30 seconds. While he now claims he never said that to me, and maybe I made it up, but it is something I now apply to my career as a PAO.

Whether you are updating your commander, your JOC staff or trying to give your elevator speech as to why your unit is the best unit in the DoD, you only have about 30 seconds to do it and you better expel confidence. Clear and concise will at least make people think you know what you are talking about and make them care, because why would you communicate to someone who does not care? You being confident makes them confident in your abilities.

When you talk a lot around a topic or whisper, it shows that you don't know what you are doing, even if you do. You're the one person on the commander's staff who is the subject matter expert in communicating. Do it, do it well, make your team better, and don't let anyone second guess you.

- Carly C.

Value-Added

From time to time, I run into PAOs desperate to “add value” to their organization. Sometimes, their unit is changing and the PAO is trying to keep up and change with it. Other times, the PAO knows they’re not running the commander’s communication program, and needs to build some internal credibility.

“Value-Added.” It’s a great phrase, right? It’s what we all want to be within our organizations: value-added to the mission, for our team, and on behalf of our career field.

Three things about the phrase “value-added” come to mind:

- 1. It implies action.** The key verb here is “add” — someone has to be actively adding the value, and that someone has to be you. What other verb would make sense in this construct? Value taken? Value received? Nope, it’s not your commander’s (or anyone else’s) job to recognize and pull out your potential value if you’re hanging out in the background. Stop asking questions about your role, or talking about different possibilities. Stand up and do the adding.
- 2. It’s past-tense.** Nobody talks about “value-adding” or “soon-to-add-value” — if you want a unique and important role on the staff, you’ll need to build a track record to earn it. Do something. If you haven’t added value in the past, then you have no business complaining about a lousy reputation now. And if you haven’t been doing that within your team, you can start today.
- 3. Value is valuable.** Be a linchpin. Offer perspective, skills and service that your command needs, that can’t be found anywhere else. Offer up your clear understanding of the media environment, your ability to tailor forever lines to national policy and your commander’s goals, your infectious personality to build relationships with media members and community leaders.

Take action and make those actions matter. That’s how you become “value-added.”

- Dave C.

Charge Into Work Like a Winner

You control the way your team and colleagues meet the day.

The things you say in the morning’s first five or 30 minutes will set their attitude and priorities for the challenges ahead. Over the course of a year or more, these simple comments will have a dramatic effect on your office’s reputation and productivity.

Talk about your mission early, and often.

Know the day’s priorities and let everyone know you’re laser focused on driving unprecedented momentum. What’s in the news? Which engagements are you looking forward to? What are the next steps on your team’s long-term projects?

Think Like a Commander.

Your leader chooses their words wisely. More than anyone else, you communicate and double down on your leader’s vision. Don’t be another staff guy slob.

Always Be Messaging.

Your questions and actions emphasize your focus and inspire others -no matter your rank, age or position in the office (or JOC). A great early run that launched you into the day reminds others that they ought to be keeping up. A positive story about the post security guards, or DFAC team, says your culture appreciates others. The fact that you know what your units were up to overnight says you’re the headquarters PAO focused on their operations.

It’s Not About You.

So even though your family, the way you slept, or how badly you need some coffee might be at the top of your mind, have the discipline to save it for never. Bad traffic? Shitty weather? Couldn’t find a parking spot? Let’s talk about something important.

We’re about building relationships, and sharing personal stories, as much as the next guy ... but save it for the right time and communicate for purpose. Get to know your teammates during a mid-day pause watching the fish, or over a drink when the day’s work is behind you. Even then, it’s not about you.

Start your day on full power. Save opportunities to connect and recharge for the point in the day where you need it.

- Dave C.

The Bucket of Responses

We've learned to walk around carrying a bucket.

Remember when we recommended you always be ready to pitch a pitch? Always be ready to answer the questions you know people will ask. Each question is an opportunity to support your team. Carry a bucket of responses.

"How's it going today, Dave?"

My bucket has operations-specific responses, "Solid, we have an embed coming up and it's all coming together." I provide useful information to an ops-minded person, opening the door for more questions or productive discussion. My bucket has resource specific responses, "It's going great. We have what we need and no more. Thanks for your help in setting us up for success." I made this guy part of our solution.

My bucket has support-specific responses, "Today is really good, we are launching the new advanced comms program this week." I spread the word about a new program we need organizational support for.

I could say, "It's going great, how about you?" I could only nod. But we're in the business of meaningful conversation, so if you ask us how it's going, we're going to tell you.

Just like you can forecast media questions for an RTQ, you can forecast useless pleasantries questions. You know it's Monday, people are going to ask you about the weekend. Something big happened in the news, people will ask you about it. It's raining, so useless weather talk will be rich.

Get ready, consider your responses ahead of time and start supporting your team through meaningful conversation. Time is our only limited resource.

Simple, right? Good, because you know your boss is going to ask you the same things he asks you every time. Be prepared, it's your job.

- Dave B.

Ask the Right Questions

Sixty percent of leadership is asking the right questions.

When you ask the right questions, you use your experience and responsibility to guide others into solving problems themselves. I learned this more as a commander than as a PAO—with my small, busy team, I focused on breaking down my own assumptions and asking questions that were always clear, often creative and sometimes uncomfortable.

In the Public Affairs realm, there's a reason the Q&As are the most important part of any PAG or Briefing Card — Q&As make everything real. Your job is to think like a journalist and ask the hard questions that you know will be coming your way, and have answers for them. If you're sugarcoating your planning documents with feel-good questions then you are failing to plan for contingencies ... and thus failing plan at all. If you're dismissing hard questions with a "no one will ask that," check yourself, because you might be underestimating the media. If you're only proposing the Q&As that you can answer yourself without further research, you might be delivering a product full of empty command messages with no true substance.

As a leader, asking the right questions builds discipline and credibility within your team. The right questions open the door to a productive discussion, without having to depend on assumptions or authority.

Small example: Two of my star performers once excitedly asked permission to "fly to Georgia" in order to cover a command information story for a different organization. I asked, "Does this story support our mission, or do you just want to do this so you can ride on a helicopter?" They admitted it was the latter, and agreed to cover our own local soldiers.

Here's a sampling of the questions I've asked:

- "Do you have everything you need?"
- "Is there anyone else you could talk to?"
- "What did the Secretary of Defense say about this topic?"
- "When did you tell the XO you'd be done?"
- "Did you verify that statement is true?"
- "What did you say to that reporter?"
- "What charges did you make on your Government Travel Card?"
- "Why did you go with that picture for that article?"
- "What did you do for PT this morning?"
- "Did you write those words yourself?"
- "Are you drunk?"
- "When's the last time you cleaned this piece of equipment?"
- "If I took this camera out right now, would it work?"
- "What's your priority today?"

Here are the three groups of people The Right Questions will help you connect with:

- 1. People Who Know What To Do.** These teammates are smart and motivated, but everyone gets caught up looking in the wrong direction. The right questions can refocus their attention on the bigger picture, or draw attention to administrative or logistical details that they didn't know to consider.
- 2. People Who Need to Figure Out Where They Stand.** A former mentor of mine often took me to Public Affairs "school" through the Socratic method—he'd challenge me to think about social media metrics, organizational behavior, strategic policy, and beyond. Even a simple "why" eventually strips away your assumptions, forcing you to test or reaffirm your own position. This is essential to AARs: with no emotion or baggage, we ask ourselves "why did we do this" and "what was different this time" in order to make faster, more clear decisions in the future.
- 3. People Who Are Trying to Get Away With Something.** Lying destroys communication, including lies by omission. You can prevent lies by omission by asking the right questions. This type of question-asking calls for a high degree of discipline and wit; in doing so you can keep the organization on track and protect others from their own laziness.

Ask the right questions, and your people will learn to give the right answers.

- Dave C.

A Cup of Coffee, A Beer and the Carolina Sun

Leaders should think.

There are volumes of research on the topic. There are thousands of business books that remind us to keep an eye on the big prize, the strategic objective the golden goose.

Lots of PAOs feel like they are massively busy. There's always another query, the organization feels like it's in constant flux, near disaster and the boss wants to be sure the Facebook page has current and kitschy (but not too kitschy) posts.

We all want to be employed in a purpose driven organization with a purpose driven job. Good news, if you're in the military, you are. You defend the country, you take care of the people who do.

We're purpose driven but busy. Make time.

One summer day in North Carolina I drank a cup of coffee, then a beer, then mowed the lawn. I'm not fat and I was well hydrated so I didn't die. While mowing I was thinking about work, because I think work is important. I had an epiphany. I stalled the mower and texted some of my coworkers. They were on board. On Monday, we built the program, it changed the organization.

It wasn't an earth shattering idea. It was just a way of combining the many thoughts and ideas we had already been working through. I took some time to think. To think about what we were trying to achieve overall, and suddenly the single tasks we had been working on became a holistic organization-wide program.

My boss can be hard on his aide to camp. He presses the aide for executive time. He presses him for preparation time. He knows how important it is to think. He also knows how easy it is to slip into the here and now.

Great spokespersons we've worked with also prioritize time to think. Instead of cramming and stressing before a press conference, one stepped out for a long run in the Iraqi sun, saying it kept him fresh and focused before the engagement.

Take a minute to look at your fish tank and consider what the hell you're trying to do. Beer and coffee help.

- Dave B.

Produce 1,000 Words Per Day

Too often we listen to PAOs tell us that they're so busy. "Doing what?" we ask.

"Meetings, emails, stuff," they say.

Consider what you do each day, all day. Are you spinning or are you producing?

Prioritize your time. Somewhere in there, fit in production of content. You will find that the drive to produce content, whether it be a feature story, video script, communication training, manifesto, or whatever, will make you and your organization better. Outlet mechanisms are easy. In the past, we've sent out emails, we started bathroom newsletters, we produce YouTube videos or simple fact sheets about various aspects of our organization. No matter the release (or not release)* venue, it's the production that often counts.

Producing content drives you to see outside of your office and learn more about your organization. In these contacts you will find opportunity.

Producing content forces you to be in contact with the people you serve.

You will learn their needs and teach them what you do.

Producing content makes you more valuable to your organization in crisis. You have more and better relationships, you've trained people to be subjects.

Producing content keeps you sharp on your skills. The more content you produce, the better producer you become.

Producing content makes you valuable to the command. Once your content catches on (and it will), people will line up at your door with subject ideas. Sometimes they want to be featured, sometimes they want their people featured.

Fun fact: This is why MaxDisclosure.com exists. We are a team of PAOs ... really, a couple of schmoes ... who were having lots of face-to-face conversations about our career field, culture and mission. Not much was happening with those conversations. For more than a year, we've put those thoughts into writing, challenging ourselves to clearly define and defend our positions. Sometimes it's stressful, and usually it's fun. At the end of the day, we are sharing something tangible that others (hopefully) can build from.

Take a break from the ruthless staff work. Emails often answer themselves. Take a break from the spin and start producing. It's good for you and your organization.

** "Not Release" is important here. Write 1,000 words a day ... and then ruthlessly cut those words down to only the content necessary to build understanding and drive action.*

- Dave B.

Stop Sounding So Lame

I was listening to a discussion the other day and someone chimed in with kind of a geeky, weak and puny voice. I looked up to find he was of relatively senior rank with all the badges and flare in a position of influence. This guy is at a disadvantage ... he sounds like a bitch. His auditory presence defies his position, his experience and his resume (much of which he wears on his chest).

If you're following the rules (and want to be effective), I'm sure you try to meet a person face to face before you call and you call before you email. We use our entire bodies when we communicate, especially our voice. Pay attention to how you sound.

This isn't just me being judgmental, although I am. This is science.

You prepare your leaders to communicate. Talk to them about how they sound. If you're coaching a Flag Officer, he or she likely already has a commanding voice because their voice is helped them get there in the first place. PAOs have enough trouble with preconceived notions about their jobs and their position within the organization. Don't encourage this notion by sounding like a whiny duck. Command your audience with your voice.

Listen to yourself or the person you're coaching. Record yourself. Ask a trusted friend. Do you sound lame? Fix it, do some research, it won't take long for you to start leading with your voice.

- Dave B.

Useless Pleasantries

Useless pleasantries are just that: useless. "Oh man, do you believe how cold it is?" "How about them Yankees?"

"Do you think Smitty has it in him to beat the Jets this week?" I don't give a fuck. We're wasting time.

While I don't give a fuck about the weather, I do understand some people form connections through this banter.

Remember we talked about holding meetings?

Here's a tip (what we do): build useless pleasantries into the first 5 minutes of your meeting agenda. Let everyone get all of the BS off their chests then get on to business.

- Dave B.

I Have a Dream

The Civil Rights Movement was fueled, in part, by the magnificent communication of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The most celebrated portion of his 1963 speech in Washington, “I have a dream,” was improvised. A member of his team shouted, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin!” He went off script and the rest is history.

Think about that as you prepare and prepare others to communicate.

Scripts are security. They feel good to have but end up being security to ensure your communication will be dull and less received.

Think about what happens when you are asked a question, and you have to just answer. Think about how you sound and feel when you are answering a question rather than reading a script.

Tell them about the dream, PAO. If Dr. King can go off script in front of the nation and 250,000 live, so can you.

- Dave B.

I Expect You To Use Your Brain

A group of senior public affairs officers were discussing a new policy. The policy, in certain circumstance, didn't fit or make sense. Some PAOs were caught up in the details and were missing the intent of the policy. The leader interrupted the conversation and said, “look guys, I expect you to use your brain.”

We use our brains; follow intent and make common-sense decisions. You should too.

We work in a vast bureaucracy, with rules and policies for everything. I don't believe rules are meant to be broken, but we've all worked with people who hide behind quasi-relevant rules in order to avoid doing their jobs. Rules feel safe and are devoid of any risk.

At least consider the possibility of a world where the rules are acknowledged, and a special circumstance is appropriately addressed.

When following the rules leads to barbarous results, I expect you to use your brain.

PAOs: The situation on the ground doesn't align perfectly with the PAG? Use your brain and coordinate a true and useful response. Go on background to add context and explain the circumstances.

Security guards: A badge-holding organization member is trying to bring their spouse or infant into the building? Use your brain: we need you to find and prevent security threats, not invent fake problems.

Help desk folks: Someone's asked you to enable a certain capability on a short timeline? The world moves fast: use your brain, be part of the solution, and help people do their own jobs.

Having trouble getting others to use their brains?

- **Be sure you're right.** You're a savvy member of the commander's personal staff, so use your knowledge and access to feel the organization's pulse. Know that your leader's values can/will be reflected in this situation.
- **Make it your business to know people, and have them know you.** Strong relationships create space for common-sense reasoning. If you don't know the person you're dealing with, at least know others on their team.
- **When you need something, start with why.** Tie it to your mission and appeal to your organization's defined and stated culture.
- **Seek responsibility.** Show people that you're not afraid to put your name on the line. The good ones will follow your example. The bad ones will shrug and say, “it's your funeral.” Either way, the job gets done.
- **Empower others.** Give your people the space to use their best judgment and make decisions. Reward bias for action, even if it results in failure.

- Dave C.

Thank you for what?

You put together this crazy long report for your commander because that is what he asked for. You send it to him and 300 other people in your command and you sign the email “Thank you!”

You get a call from 14 people asking about a leak that had nothing to do with your command taking up 140 minutes you could be doing something else. You end the call with “Thanks.”

Your super excited (and often bored) co-worker sends you stories that have nothing to do with your command and are just distracting from the mission. You respond with “Thanks for sending.”

Thank you for what? Do you want more? You might as well write, “Thank you, sir, may I have another?”

Think about it. How often does the J2 or J3 end his or her emails with “Thank you!”? Umm not as much as PAOs, from my experience.

Like most things I blog about, I got called out for using “Thank you” when it did not apply. I was on autopilot. I wanted to be polite, but I was being a poor communicator. I did not need to say that to be polite, professional and a good communicator. So naturally, I am now super critical about how I end my emails.

Words mean things. We’ve all heard this. Choose your words wisely and make sure you are sending the right message even when you sign your emails. We are communicators. Is “thanks” the message you always want to send?

Be careful what you ask for and remember that you’re always messaging.

- Carly C

Talk to Me Like I Have to Piss

The other day a guy I work with had something to tell me. I had to piss and of course I waited till the last minute when it was a near emergency.

I got up to speed walk to the bathroom and he said, “Hey, you have a minute?”

I said, “Yes but I have to piss SO JUST TELL ME WHAT I NEED TO KNOW.”

He did, I made a decision, and we were done.

Time is our only limited resource. Talk to me like I have to piss.

- Dave B.

Networking is Dumb

I’m a busy dude. The people that work with me are busy. We will make time for anyone who asks for it. Everyone is a VIP.

Once upon a time a guy asked to meet with me. He came by, spent about an hour with me. We exchanged useless pleasantries and talked about our jobs. He didn’t need or want anything from me. He was “networking.”

No. He was wasting my time.

This same guy contacted me every few weeks, “How’s it going Sir?” “How’s the family?” “Are you doing anything special this weekend?” Umm, yes I’m protecting the country. Now stop calling me unless you have a purpose.

Too much business advice centers around the idea of networking. Let’s fix that word. Networking. How about just ‘work’?

We enjoy friends and contacts all over the military, inter-agency and corporate communication industry. We’ve never had a networking lunch or dinner. We’ve had plenty of work lunches and dinners.

It is through work communal progress and situation management where relationships are formed.

It makes sense to know and get together with other communicators before a crisis happens. It makes absolute sense to form relationships before you need them. Do that through purposeful engagement. Bring public affairs officers on your base together for a brain storming session on any useful topic.

Years ago, the Director of Press Operations for DoD visited our place. Instead of holding a networking event, we asked him to speak to a group of junior public affairs officers, then answer questions. We focused the time on tangible, purposeful outcomes.

Next time someone tells you you need to spend some time networking with your community, tell them you’ve got work to do.

- Dave B.



Read and Be Better

Remember we said you have to be the communication expert in your organization? Just like the Doc, the lawyer and the chaplain? Not the chaplain. Anyway, one way to become an expert is by reading.

Set up an office reading program.

Every two months or so we buy a book for anyone in the office who wants to participate (most do). After about 30 days we all sit down to discuss in a somewhat organized manner. Here are the books our office read.

Our World and New Perspectives.

- ***The New Tsar.*** Putin is a pretty interesting character. Reading this will help you understand the history and give you perspective on where we are today.
- ***The Originals.*** Every PA office has creative folks. This will give you some insight on how to manage and explode your potential.
- ***Black Flags.*** The story of ISIS. If you have anything to do with this war, you have to read this.
- ***Objective Troy.*** Interested in how we got to where we are with drones and terrorism? Read this. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is Al Qaeda's most capable and committed threat to the United States. This is the story of how they came to be.
- ***Execution.*** Decent book on managing the effort of your shop. Some good chapters in here but may be too much for the whole shop to read the whole book. Recommend you read and discuss a few perti-

nent chapters.

- ***The Everything Store.*** Jeff Bezos, love him or hate him, he fosters a definitive, intentional culture. From the way Amazon members communicate internally to hiring and fostering talent within your ranks, there are lessons here for everybody.

Communication Essentials.

Remember, you're an expert. Experts not only read but keep books to reference from time to time. We have a fairly regular stream of organization members who come by asking for communication advice.

Here is what our book case looks like:

- ***Brief.*** Be better, Be Brief. Written by our good friend and colleague Joe McCormack. I feel like we wrote this book together.
- ***How to Win Friends and Influence People.*** Read this once a year and be better at your job and life.
- ***Start with Why.*** Throw this book at people who have to talk about technical things.
- ***Elements of Style.*** Live it. If you're a PAO, you better know this.
- ***On Writing Well.*** Learn it, love it. Your guide to effective written communication.
- ***Power Cues.*** The Science of interpersonal communication; kind of lamely written but useful points after you sort through the garb.
- ***If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*** Who doesn't like Hawkeye? A better narrative than Power Cues with similar lessons.
- ***All Marketers are Liars.*** People want to believe, help them believe in your truth.
- ***Made to Stick.*** Learn more about stories and communication technique.
- ***Trust Me, I'm Lying.*** Information laundering 101. Know how it works so you can defend against it.
- ***Politics and the English Language.*** Not a book, but don't pick up a pen without first reading this essay.

- Dave B.

**Now go and do
likewise.**