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Get Rid of Those Big Unit Blues

One of the most perplexing phone calls I receive on a regular basis is from officers, usually commanders, who want to know how to succeed inside a large unit. The conversation usually goes something like this: “I’ve always been in a small unit, and I’ve often been ranked ‘1 of 1’ against myself. Suddenly, I’m being grouped with thirty, or forty, or more commanders in my FITREP group. What should I do?”

Well, the first thing I’d do, if I were in your shoes, would be to celebrate. Not too long, and not too hard, but this is a cause for celebration. Because only now (and perhaps for the first time in your career) will you have the opportunity to show what you’ve got. It is a chance to earn that breakout FITREP that shows you are ready for the next step. You just can’t do that with an unbroken chain of “1 of 1’s.” But it’s going to take some hard work – the kind that you enjoy anyway. So here are some tips for planning your success.

First of all, when you are assigned to a very large unit (e.g., over 100-150 people), you will find that the command structure will be well established long before the date you report. Good commanding officers will have designated their XOs and their Department Heads long before the start of the fiscal year, so you probably won’t have the chance to start out at that level. *But ask anyway!* The day that you first learn of your new billet, you should be on the Internet and on the phone, e-mailing and calling your new CO/XO. Volunteer for anything that they do have open.

In most new units, you will find that they have a comprehensive (and sometimes lengthy) training/qualification period,

during which you may be required to attend formal courses. Some of these courses may take up entire drill weekends, so that your first opportunity to do any work for the unit will be four-to-five months into the year. Suggestion: try to get through these qualifications as quickly as possible. If you have an extra day or two to use as nonpaid additional drills, consider using them for this purpose. Finish your required training early so that you will be ready to move into a job as soon as possible. A FITREP filled with bullets reporting “course completions” will not move you ahead in the world today.

In many large units, the organizational chart includes an assistant department head for training, admin, etc. Very often, these spots go begging for volunteers. Why? I can’t give you an answer, because these assistants often “fleet up” to the DH job within a year. And yet, most COs have a tough time getting officers to raise their hands for these duties. Suggestion: raise your hand for these duties! They are a fast-track to a role as a “player” in your unit.

The next point to discuss is your actual job within the unit, and more importantly, within the supported command. Each of us should keep this in mind as Job #1. (Remember, *support to the fleet . . . ready and fully integrated.*) Each of us must be technically proficient in the job that we will perform for our supported command when we mobilize. This involves professionalism at the highest levels; one that will constantly challenge our expectations of ourselves.

I urge you to complete your command’s qualifications as quickly as possible (once you complete your indoctrination training). If this means serving as a command duty officer in an operations center, then try to

qualify within the first six months after standing your first watch. Schedule your AT so that you can accelerate this pace, if possible. Become the very best officer, from an operational sense, that you can be. The ultimate goal is for your fellow watch standers to think of you as a member of the Active Component.

I want to stress a caveat to this past paragraph. While you are serving within your supported command’s watch (or administrative) organization, *always make sure that you are doing something to support your unit at the same time.* This is important, as you need to maintain some degree of visibility to your own CO. Keep your duties as Assistant Training Officer, and then be the Training Officer the following year. Accept other collateral duties, if offered. Become the indispensable officer that your CO/XO needs for planning the following year’s schedule. You will find that, with planning and a bit of extra work, you will have time to do great things for both your supported command and your Reserve unit. This is the key to surviving *and flourishing* in a large unit.

Finally, while planning all this great stuff for your own career, don’t forget to turn around and help some of those JOs who are working with you. Remember, if you think that you feel lost in a big unit, consider how a new lieutenant must feel, standing in the back of the ranks behind 75 captains and commanders! All senior officers have experience that can be passed along to the lieutenants and lieutenant junior grades who are trying to find their own ways along the path. By spending just a little time with these junior officers, you can make a big difference in their careers. You will probably find that your own career becomes more rewarding as well. ↴