

Reflections from a Principal Staff Officer – LTCOL R Holmes

Throughout my time as DQ 3rd Brigade (3 Bde), most people I met would ask or comment on how busy I was. It was certainly a busy job, but probably no busier than most other post staff-college jobs in Army. It was, however, the first job that I had done which I simply could not complete all the work required of me. It was also the first job where I was expected to know more than I really did. This short paper provides advice on how I addressed these two shortfalls so that others in the same predicament (approaching any demanding role – not just DQ 3 Bde) can benefit from my hindsight. There are three key facets which I believe enabled me to cope with the workload and maintain credibility. These are prioritising work, developing personal relations and persistently confirming capability.

Prioritising Work

With countless emails, projects, tasks and demands – it is necessary to appreciate what order each should be done in. I must confess I did not have a magical priority list at the time to order my day and keep me on track. Rather, as I became comfortable with the job, I gained a broad appreciation of what was most important. For me, the priority was: dealing with incidents or war-stoppers (including priority Commander's tasks or RFIs); attending scheduled HQ activities such as Commander's Update Briefs and Contingency Force Element (CONFE) working groups; attending to staff issues; returns to higher HQ; answering emails; longer term projects; and everything else in the Brigade's battle rhythm. There were times when it was necessary to focus on, and make time for, the lower priority tasks - particularly some of the slow burn projects which were important such as equipment cross-level under PLAN KEOGH, or planning for the arrival of the Land 121 fleet.

I will talk more about personal relations, but at the core of 'attending to staff issues' was making myself available so that anyone could come and ask questions, seek guidance, provide a back-brief or simply vent on an issue. This meant that emails usually got answered after-hours, which was quite ok given people expected I was busy and I had already established a routine of working in the evenings. I will note that the Army is becoming too reliant on email as a means of communication and it's becoming overwhelming. I often felt bad that I was forwarding countless emails that would be waiting for my staff in the morning – simply adding to the email problem. If a quick phone call can avoid generating or returning an email then it's worth making.

Personal Relations

I marveled at Commander 3rd Bde's first few weeks in the job as his priority was to get out and meet every person he would work with – both military and local community leaders. I made an effort to get to know my staff, bring together the unit S4s and establish relationships with supporting units; however, I think I could have done more in this space and, like the Commander, it should have been at the top of my priority list. If I had my time again, I would make sure that I conducted an office call with all Commanding Officers, OPSOs and S4s at their unit location. I would also have made a greater effort to visit supporting agencies such as the local Joint Logistics Unit (JLU), Joint Movement Control Office (JMCO), Joint Operations Support Staff (JOSS), Combat Health Centre (CHC) and Reserve Brigade HQ.

There were a few things that I felt did assist me in building and maintaining personal relationships. Firstly, I realised that any 3 Bde Combat Service Support (CSS)/logistic meetings (such as our monthly CSS synchs) needed to include all the local (non-3 Bde) units. These units were working alongside us, enabled us, or at the very least had a vested interest in what we were planning on doing. Secondly, I took a trip early in my positing to Headquarters Forces Command and met the staff (mostly G4) who I would be dealing with. This proved to be most valuable, especially meeting the civilian staff who I needed to develop good working relationships with. Lastly, I learnt to 'let go' of some areas of work and to trust my staff to do it. As previously established, there was too much work for me to do alone; therefore, it was important to have faith that each person in the team would do what they needed to.

Persistently Confirming Capability

The starting point for any CSS-related plan, task or problem was to understand what Brigade capabilities were available. Capability is determined through an understanding of force structure (what we have) and readiness (when it can be tasked). For the S4 Cell at HQ 3 Bde this meant generating and maintaining 'Start States'. It is the simplest things that sometimes take the most staff effort and this was certainly the case when it came to Start States. First, this information was dynamic – equipment and personnel continually break or get fixed and come back on-line. Second, the DQ's persistent desire to know exactly what was available may not have been a priority for a unit S4 or commanding officer at that point in time, as they were busy with countless other tasks. Finally, there is not a single IT system that can be used in barracks and on exercise/operations, so there was a lot of effort duplicating information that was kept on excel documents, MILIS, PMKEYs, VIPA, BMS and whiteboards around the Brigade.

Armed with accurate information on capability, my staff and I were enabled to solve any problem thrown at us. Without this information, it was virtually impossible to commence planning or determine how to sustain the force. Noting the difficulties highlighted above – I would recommend DQs, HQ staff and S4s note the importance of persistently confirming capability and work together, within the current IT constraints, to maintain this information as best they can.

Conclusion

Being DQ of a Combat Brigade was a fantastic experience and something that more logistics Majors should aspire to. I don't regret for a moment being thrown in the deep end and being forced to learn how to deal with knowledge gaps and an excessive workload. There is obviously a lot more to the job than outlined above, but I hope discussion of these three aspects provides some use to future DQs, or staff posted to a Brigade CSS role.

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