

The 10 Secret Rules of the Colonel

A Window Into the Mind of a Senior Leader

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Act like you’ve been here before.” I still remember this scathing indictment from my squadron commander when a bunch of Captains were about to be turned loose on their first Nellis TDY. I believe that simple mantra applies across the spectrum of Airman development: find what “right” looks like among those further ahead in your journey, model that behavior, and incorporate those skills and perspectives into your tool bag well before they’re needed.

If you’re reading this, it’s likely you have some aspirations of being a colonel. I look back throughout my career and remember old, crusty colonels talking about the “unwritten rules”. It added a mystique and intimidation factor that hampered my confidence my initial development as a senior leader. Maj Gen Kane’s “Good or Great: Colonel, It’s Up to You” article (Air and Space Power Journal, Spring 2011) is a good start to develop a strategic senior leader sight picture but doesn’t address a lot of the day-to-day expectations we have of our Senior Leader ranks. So, at the risk of committing heresy by divulging the secret rules, I’ve written down my perspective on the things I wish I had known as a younger officer considering the remote possibility of being a colonel. There’s no rocket science here, and many of them will seem obvious. However, my hope is that seeing these rules will give you a little better confidence and perspective, making you more effective throughout your career.

Understand everyone is making it up as they go

There’s no denying the vast chasm between O-5 and O-6—acknowledge and embrace it. Throughout your career, full colonels have been god-like mythical creatures wielding the power of professional life and death over you. Here’s the biggest secret—none of us really knew what we were doing the day we pinned on the eagles. Don’t be intimidated by the role; if you were given this opportunity, you’ve been endorsed for years by colonels and generals who already walked that path and obviously saw the character and skills in you which would allow you to succeed. However, we do expect colonels to enter this new level with some humility. You don’t know it all yet (even after reading these secret rules); we expect you to own up to that and work harder than ever to build your relationships, skills, and effectiveness. Study leadership, actively seek mentoring, and constantly, brutally

debrief yourself with your own introspection and feedback from others. Above all, enter the senior leader role as you. Nobody expects a dramatic personality change (unless you're a total jerk, and if so I hope you've been weeded out years earlier), and your peers and Airmen will smell a contrived act a mile away. You now have the chance to be the colonel you always wanted to follow, and avoid being the one you feared and despised.

Be beyond reproach

“Integrity First” is the expectation for all Airmen, but senior rank and position bring new heights of scrutiny. As they say, the higher you go up the flagpole, the more folks can see your hind-end. Here are a few thoughts on how your personal ethics and integrity can make or break your effectiveness:

Drive your own car, spend your own money, sleep with your own spouse. Seems simple enough, but the bulk of substantiated senior leader investigations fall in those three categories. Be aware that more people are watching, and things you might have “gotten away with” in the past will draw more attention.

Be transparent

You can't tell everyone everything but be as candid as possible in how you make decisions, administer discipline, develop the force, and communicate with your Airmen. The more people know where you come from and see that you have the organization's best interest at heart, the more they'll give you the benefit of the doubt.

Be approachable

If your Airmen know they can come to you with an issue without being shot, they're more likely to give you the opportunity to fix it before going VFR direct to the IG.

Realize it isn't about you

My first operational wing commander, the first O-6 I got to observe close-up, would expect the ops desk personnel to have a Diet Coke and a Snickers Bar (from the fridge) waiting for him on the desk when he returned from flying. Almost 30 years later, I still remember the impression that left on young 1Lt Horn: he made it to the top of the pyramid, and we were all there to serve him. Fortunately, that pyramid has inverted over decades, and our Air Force is populated by many senior leaders who realize we exist to serve and support our Airmen. Hopefully, that is the primary reason you want to be a colonel in the first place: the opportunity to have greater influence not for shameless self-promotion but to remove roadblocks from your Air-

men's path. My advice is this: take the job seriously, but not yourself; don't believe your own press releases; and never be the leader you said you wouldn't be.

There are some easy outward signs that you truly have a heart for servant leadership

1. You model humility and respect: you truly show your Airmen that you treasure the gift of leading them, and you talk to the janitor, gate guard, or maintainer with the same respect you do your boss' boss. Humility and respect are signs of great confidence and strength. You also apply regular introspection and honest self-reflection to avoid believing your own press releases. You have a great opportunity to show your people trust and respect by pushing decisions to the lowest possible level (and even letting them fail), including making your subordinates make uncomfortable decisions instead of punting them to your level. Finally, you show strength and humility by intentionally surrounding yourself with a diverse team who don't all think like you; encourage them to challenge your ideas, and you'll come out with even stronger solutions.
2. You carry your own bags: you're willing to roll up your sleeves and pitch in to take out the trash (or literally carry your own bags). However, there will be times when your Airmen insist on doing the dirty work as their display of servant leadership. Let them, and go find another way to pitch in.
3. You respect your Airmen's time and passion: be on time, always. Unless you couldn't escape from someone who outranked you, then apologize sincerely and move things along even faster. Eliminate any meeting that can be accomplished through other means and cut necessary meetings to the bone by focusing only on cross-cutting issues. Also, remember each of your Airmen chose to serve and had at least some say in their profession. I still don't understand why some people love some jobs, but I truly admire their passion and genuinely appreciate the impact they have on the organization.
4. You go to the mat for your Airmen: too many leaders fall prey to the tendency to play it safe when the next job might be on the line. Take some professional risk and treat each job as though it's your last when advocating for your Airmen and the resources they need to accomplish the mission.

Meet and exceed the expectations of your Airmen

Airmen want honest, bold leadership, and have high expectations when they interact with a senior officer. Even if you're on the far end of the introvert spectrum, you need to engage your Airmen with genuine interest each time you're in public. If you are an

introvert, you'll find continuous engagement with your Airmen exhausting, but it's essential to dig deep into your heart and play an extrovert on TV.

Your Airmen are looking to you and your Chief for what "right" looks like in a leadership team. You should be lock-step and show up at as many events together as possible. You and Chief should discuss when to combine your efforts, and when to divide-and-conquer, then compare notes.

You should be prepared to share your vision and priorities clearly and succinctly on a moment's notice (which assumes you've thoughtfully developed them). If you're not comfortable with impromptu public speaking, now is a great time to work on that.

During each interaction, be even more aware of the power of your words to either build or destroy. As a younger knuckle-dragging Hog Driver and JTAC, I used sarcasm as my go-to communication style; when I got serious about being a senior leader and applied some introspection (or gave enough apologies), I acknowledged the cutting power those words could have and consciously reshaped my approach. I also look back to the tremendous positive impact a few sincere, specific words of praise or encouragement could have on the trajectory of a career or a life. Be that uplifting leader at every possible opportunity.

Beware the trap of empty platitudes and easy promises. If you're doing it right, your Airmen will come to you for help removing obstacles preventing them from accomplishing the mission, and they usually have some great ideas to fix the issue. However, they expect action from your words, so weigh them heavily. If you like the idea, let them know then follow through. If it's a non-starter, help educate why, then see if there's another way to approach the problem.

Don't wait for your Airmen to bring you problems. Think back to what frustrated you as a lieutenant or lieutenant colonel. If you can fix it, do it! If not, or you now understand why, communicate that as well.

Make friends

Colonels enter a new peer group with a wide range of experiences. I've found I like almost all the colonels with whom I served, and they became good friends and resources. Actively build relationships—network at functions, make some calls, work together on common interests, and let your hair down a little when in a group of your peers (remember they're making it up as they go along too). You'll find a flock of eagles (an *aerie*, by the way) looks a lot like a gaggle of captains when there's nobody else in the room, so don't miss an opportunity to spend social time with your peers. As a junior officer, go out of your way to build relationships among your peers; they'll be life-long friends and allies as you tackle increasing levels of leadership together. One of the best things about being a colonel is that you can pick up the phone and

go direct to another decision-maker, but that's much more effective if you already have a relationship.

Deal with issues privately

If we want an environment where senior leaders can collaborate, we expect the opportunity to understand and fix issues before they get to the boss. We never want to whitewash issues or circle the wagons around bad behavior, but it is bad form to betray the trust of our group by calling out a fellow colonel in public. If you're having an issue with another group or wing, take that colonel to coffee to discuss it privately and figure out a collaborative solution.

Don't force it. The few colonels I didn't strongly bond with almost all shared one trait: I didn't feel like they cared about me as a person, only how I could benefit them or their organization. Rather than getting right to business as you build a relationship, take some time to understand where your counterpart is coming from and what will benefit him or her.

Be humble enough to ask for advice from those who have walked the ground. We all showed high competence in strong organizations in order to make it to this level, but be honest in your knowledge, skill, or experience gaps and find mentors who can share their lessons learned. As one of my pilot training instructors said, "learn from others' mistakes, because you'll never live long enough to make them all yourself."

On the flip side, it's time to evaluate long-standing relationships with those who are now your subordinates to avoid a perception of favoritism. I'm not saying cut them out of your lives but be aware that more Airmen are looking at you to see if those in your "tribe" get treated more favorably.

Know what's important

One of the best things about being a colonel in command is that you get to set the path for a large organization, but these rules apply when leading any team, flight, or squadron.

Start with culture: identify, model, enforce, and preach it in the simplest possible terms at every opportunity. You also need to focus on defining your organization: your "Why", mission, core competencies, and goals, and again communicate those simply and frequently to your Airmen.

Pick two or three things you want to get done. As you receive your new superpowers, you will have a desire to try to solve world peace and end hunger among a dozen other goals. You'll probably end up disappointed and exhausted. Instead, focus on two or three clearly defined objectives you'll passionately pursue during your time in the seat. If you're doing it right, you'll never finish everything during

your tenure, but you'll be able to hand off an organization further along than when you took the guidon.

Develop a constant theme. I've gotten away from yearly commander's guidance and instead focus on enduring priorities. Keep them simple, message them through multiple media, and occasionally go walkabout to see how well they've percolated down to your Airmen. Since we've been conditioned to three main points, I'd frame your culture and objectives into three easily-remembered words or phrases.

Think big

The most frequent reason we see O-5s not considered seriously for promotion to O-6 is a lack of strategic perspective. They're unable to think beyond their current level to articulate strategic importance; foster collaborative orientation and provide state, national, or international context.

Build your knowledge base by plugging into strategic knowledge streams—Early Bird, Air Force Public Affairs updates, news streams, and myriad others pertinent to your areas of interest; use them to put your organization in context and enhance your ability to tie your Airmen into something bigger than themselves.

Get outside your cylinder of excellence! Develop collaborative relationships throughout your organization, across to peer organizations, and up to the state, national, and international level. I expect my subordinate commanders to work together and do some give-and-take to solve problems, not bring me the baby like Solomon.

Develop and articulate a long-range vision for your organization. This, along with your culture, mission statement, and core competencies shouldn't come down from you on stone tablets. Rather, it should be a collaborative effort with leaders throughout your organization. If it's your commander's intent brought to life with their words and their passion, they own it and will make it happen much more effectively than a top-down edict.

Tell your Airmen's and units' stories. Stay connected to your people and organizations so you can help share their successes (or needs) to a broad audience at a moment's notice. Never miss an opportunity to share their accomplishments with your boss. Don't just focus on the "Gucci" units either; you should crow about a comptroller winning a national award as much as a JTAC earning a Silver Star.

Actively practice balance

Here's a tough one: odds are if you're seriously considering being a colonel someday, you have a track record of being a "do-er" and achieving results. As a senior leader, a narrow focus or a lack of balance may actually be counter-productive. Don't get me wrong—you still need to work hard, but on the right things at the

right time. Here are several areas where I believe you need to actively work to find and maintain balance:

1. **Emotion vs. consistency:** You need to display energy and passion, but a true leader doesn't get to have a bad day. Your people expect a consistent response from you regardless of the circumstances. You also need to be an optimistic realist, expecting the best possible outcome to each situation; as Napoleon quoted, "Leaders are dealers in hope".
2. **Work vs. life:** You need to be available for your people, but you also need to invest heavily in your families, communities, faith, and civilian relationships. Don't be afraid to leave on time, take vacations, and unplug on the weekends. In addition to keeping yourself in the fight, taking time off benefits your Airmen as well; they're watching you and following your lead. If you actively cultivate your life outside work, they'll feel free to do the same (and probably stick around longer).
3. **Heads up vs heads down:** It's easy to get sucked into the day-to-day of OPRs, meetings, telecons, and projects. Instead, make a conscious effort each day to get out of the office and talk to your people; spend a little time learning more about the strategic aspects of your job; take some time to write down strategic thoughts or lessons learned; and commit time to learn more about leadership. Build space into your calendar if necessary (including using your commute and travel time).
4. **Presence vs. disruption:** This one's tricky. Airmen want to have the opportunity to interact with you, but the higher rank you are the more they feel the urge to brush the dogs and water the ponies for a mandatory show, taking away from their time to actually get the mission done. Here are a few tips to manage presence:
 - **Set expectations.** Make sure your leaders and Airmen know that you're truly there to get to know them and understand their missions better, and don't require a lot of care and feeding. Also, with few exceptions, set a positive tone for your visits and avoid the perception that you're looking for what's wrong.
 - **Be deliberate.** Set up an agenda if you're visiting a unit with a specific objective and stick to it. Don't keep them waiting as you move to the next shop.
 - **Mix media.** Your interaction should use a whole golf-bag full of clubs, from town halls to leadership round-tables to virtual messaging to one-on-one conversations. Adapt your engagement to the needs of your units and Airmen.

- Follow through. Make sure you take notes, work their issues, and follow up publicly or privately on progress, results, or roadblocks.

Grow yourself and your bench

Command is a temporary privilege, and your primary job is to make sure the organization thrives when the inevitable day comes to step away.

Continue to develop wisdom. If nothing else, becoming an O-6 drove home how much I still needed to learn. Widely expanding my scope of responsibility and influence forced me to acknowledge that being an intuitive leader got me there but wouldn't make me effective at the next level. In fact, taking group command was the catalyst for me to truly study leadership, organizational dynamics, strategic thinking, and communication. I also started documenting some of this growth to map my own progress and share with up-and-coming leaders (I'd be happy to share my reading list with you). If I had the spark and an initial vector to start studying leadership earlier in my career, I guarantee I would have been more effective at every level.

1. Invest in junior leaders: Your primary focus is to identify your talent, build rapport with them, and invest in their futures. While “mentor” is a convenient term, I prefer to consider myself a coach. Where a mentor says, “do what I did and you can be me someday”, a coach helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of players (that they themselves might not be aware of) in order to build on strengths and work on weaknesses. Also, just as a coach helps identify the right position for a player, you can use your experience to provide realistic expectation management to your Airmen.
2. Model and enforce a culture where mistakes are learning opportunities: Echoes of a “Zero-Defect military” still haunt us, amplified by decades of white-washing issues to “get through” inspections. If you haven't been paying attention, we're in a different era, where we have not just the opportunity but the obligation to publicly acknowledge the shortfalls within our organizations. This candid self-assessment needs to extend to our Airmen as well. You have the power to set an environment where Airmen can be audacious, risk making mistakes, and learn by, as John C. Maxwell phrases it, “failing forward”. If an Airman on my team makes a mistake, I typically ask: 1) How will you fix it; 2) What did you learn; and 3) How can we keep it from happening to you or others in the future.
3. Provide and embrace candid feedback: The higher you go, the harder it becomes to get unfiltered information. As the old saying goes, leadership is like a tree full of monkeys; from the top looking down it's all smiling faces, but from the bottom looking up it's a totally different sight picture. Cultivate “back-channels” of

trusted sources (not snitches, but canaries in the coal mine) and make sure you don't burn them.

Leave a legacy

The odds favor colonel being the final rank (and maybe position) of your military career. As a friend observed, "Colonel is the last rank that you can make through personal effort. Everything from here on out is luck and timing." Focus on the impact you can make on your Airmen and organizations.

Personally, I don't want my name on a building, and really don't have a pet project by which I want people to remember me. I'll consider my time well-spent and my life well-lived if I can visit the organization years after I depart to find it much stronger, with some of the young officers and NCOs I got to know serving as highly effective leaders. Bonus points if I hear any snippets of advice I gave them along the way come out in their words or deeds. By the way, now is a great time to look back at those who invested in you along the way and thank them for their influence—I guarantee it will make their day and add significance to their service.

What do you hope they'll say at your funeral? At the end of the day, it's not about rank, job titles, programs, or awards—those fade as soon as you step off the retirement stage. Instead, I believe the sum total of your life lies in those you impact, both in and out of uniform. There are plenty of cautionary tales about senior leaders who sacrificed all on the altar of career progression and wasted their one shot at a truly rewarding, balanced life as a spouse, parent, friend, and Airman. My final advice to you is to play the long game—invest your time, energy, and passion in others, and reap the benefits of a life well lived. □



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