



Where Vision Meets Velocity

Rules for Field-Grade Officers

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Author Note: This reflection grew from discussions among field-grade officers within the 173rd Airborne Brigade and was refined through peer and senior-leader feedback across multiple echelons. It captures lessons applicable to every officer navigating the complex space between command vision and organizational execution.

Lessons from the Middle

The field-grade years are where the Army's intent either becomes reality or quietly unravels. Long before decisions fail on the battlefield, they succeed or fail in the middle. Where guidance is interpreted, priorities are weighed, and momentum is either preserved or lost. This is the domain of the field-grade officer: a space defined less by command authority and more by responsibility.

Field-grade leadership is inherently paradoxical. You possess broad accountability but limited formal power. You are expected to influence outcomes you do not directly control and to accept responsibility for decisions you did not personally make. You advise commanders without owning the final decision. You direct staffs without commanding them. You absorb friction from above and below while ensuring the organization continues to move forward.

This reality surprises many officers. After years of tactical leadership, where authority, proximity, and decisiveness defined success, field grades discover that influence is now indirect and often invisible. Results still matter, but attribution fades. Credit

becomes diffuse, while accountability remains personal. Officers who fail to adapt to this shift often experience frustration, burnout, or disengagement. Not because they lack competence, but because they cling to an outdated definition of leadership.

This tension is most acutely felt by majors. More than any other rank, the major serves as the Army's primary integrator. Tasked with converting vision into action and synchronizing effort across people, time, and systems. Tactical competence is assumed at this level; what distinguishes effective field-grade officers is their ability to create coherence where guidance is broad, priorities compete, and resources are finite. Majors are not expected to be the smartest person in the room; they are expected to ensure the room functions.

The transition into field-grade service is therefore not simply a change in rank; it is a shift in identity. Success is no longer measured by what you personally accomplish, but by what others are able to do because of your leadership. The work becomes quieter and less visible. Influence replaces authority. Stewardship replaces ownership. Officers who thrive in this

African Lion 22 Main Planning Conference November 2021, Agadir, Morocco. Represented in this photo are members from the Joint and combined forces participating in the exercise. (Photo by MAJ Kevin Brensinger)

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space embrace the reality that their role is to enable outcomes, not own them.

Field-grade leadership also sits at the intersection of intellect and empathy. Officers must understand doctrine, process, and design while remaining attuned to morale, trust, and human limits. They must sense when friction is a signal rather than a failure, when tempo must be driven, and when it must be protected. At the field-grade level, friction is rarely an indicator that something is broken. More often, it is information. It signals misalignment between intent and execution, stress on systems, or limits being reached by people operating at tempo. Effective field-grade officers learn to read friction diagnostically rather than reactively. They resist the instinct to eliminate it reflexively or to assign blame prematurely. Instead, they ask what the friction is revealing about priorities, sequencing, resourcing, or leadership. When treated correctly, friction becomes a guide, pointing leaders toward adjustments that preserve momentum without eroding trust or exhausting the force. Presence, being fully engaged where it matters, often carries more weight than any directive.

The rules that follow are not aspirational ideals. They are practical disciplines forged in environments where speed is constant, clarity is scarce, and mistakes compound quickly. They are offered not as doctrine, but as a professional ethos for those charged with creating order without command. In the Army, velocity without vision is chaos. Vision without velocity is irrelevance. The field-grade officer exists to ensure neither occurs.

The Field-Grade Officer as Institutional Risk Manager

The Army manages risk at every echelon, but nowhere is risk absorbed more quietly, or more consequentially, than at the field-grade level. Strategic guidance is intentionally broad, tactical execution is necessarily specific, and between them sits the field-grade officer translating intent into action while managing uncertainty on both sides. In this sense, field-grade officers are not merely integrators; they are institutional risk managers.

Risk at this level is rarely dramatic. It does not announce itself as a crisis. Instead, it accumulates through ambiguity left unresolved, priorities left unranked, systems left unassessed, and leaders left undeveloped. When these risks go unmanaged, they do not remain isolated. They scale, manifesting later as readiness shortfalls, command climate failures, operational misalignment, or ethical breakdowns that appear sudden but were long in the making. Field-grade officers mitigate this risk by absorbing ambiguity before it reaches subordinates and by refining guidance before it hardens into friction. They prevent risk from cascading downward through disciplined judgment, honest feedback, and deliberate prioritization. This work is often invisible precisely because it is preventative. When done well, commanders are free to focus forward, staffs operate with confidence, and subordinate leaders execute without confusion.

This responsibility carries weight. Field-grade officers must be comfortable making decisions without perfect clarity and accepting accountability for outcomes shaped by variables they do not control. They must resist the temptation to push uncertainty downward simply to relieve personal pressure. Doing so transfers risk to those least equipped to manage

it and erodes trust across the formation. In many ways, the effectiveness of an organization can be measured by how much uncertainty its field-grade officers are willing to own. Those who understand this role recognize that risk management at this level is not about caution, it is about stewardship. It is the professional obligation to ensure that complexity does not become chaos, and that ambiguity does not become failure. In fulfilling this role, field-grade officers protect not only mission success, but the long-term health of the institution itself.

Rule 1: Identify the Implied Task — Make It Real
“Understanding precedes visualization.” –ADP 6-0

By the time an officer reaches the field-grade ranks, few tasks arrive fully formed. Guidance is often broad, incomplete, or intentionally ambiguous. This is not a failure of leadership; it is a function of trust. Senior leaders assume experienced officers will recognize what must be done without being explicitly directed. As a result, field-grade officers operate primarily in the implied. What must occur for intent to be realized, even if it is never written or spoken.

Mastery at this level requires the discipline to distinguish between assumed tasks and implied tasks. Assumed tasks fill gaps reflexively, often driven by habit or personal preference.



June 2024, Sainte-Mère-Église, France; Pulling an Assistant Jumpmaster duty during the 80th commemorative celebration of the successful D-Day allied invasion of Europe. (Photo by CSM Bryan Valentine)



Karlovy Vary, Czechia May 2025: BN Staff H2F event. Offsite to build esprit de corps and to bridge the gap between IQ and EQ.
(Photo By MAJ Kevin Brensinger)

Implied tasks emerge from intent, context, and consequence. The difference is judgment. Acting on assumptions introduces unnecessary risk. Acting on implied tasks creates alignment and momentum. Failure to identify implied tasks is one of the most common, and least visible field-grade failures. It rarely presents as outright negligence. Instead, it manifests as missed timelines, unnecessary stress on subordinate units, or commanders forced to reengage issues they expected were already in motion. Over time, this erodes trust. Commanders become more directive. Staffs become reactive. Tempo slows not because of workload, but because anticipation has failed.

Effective field-grade officers make the invisible visible. They ask what must be true for success, not just what has been directed. They frame problems early, assign ownership, and translate ambiguity into executable action. This is disciplined initiative, not freelancing. It requires comfort with uncertainty and confidence grounded in intent. Officers who consistently identify and act on implied tasks become force multipliers. They reduce friction, preserve tempo, and allow commanders to focus forward. In doing so, they demonstrate the judgment that defines professional maturity at the field-grade level

Rule 2: Operationalize the Commander's Intent

"Shared understanding is the foundation of trust." –ADP 6-22

Commander's intent is the bridge between vision and execution, but it is not self-executing. Every commander provides direction, priorities, and purpose; field-grade officers ensure those ideas become coordinated action. Operationalizing intent is therefore not a technical task, it is a leadership responsibility rooted in trust and shared understanding. At the field-grade level, trust is built through clarity. Subordinate leaders and staffs must understand not only what the commander wants, but why it matters and how success will be measured. When intent remains abstract or banner-deep, execution fragments. Teams work hard but not together. Effort increases while effectiveness declines. Shared understanding erodes, and with it, trust.

A common failure mode among field-grade officers is repeating intent rather than translating it. Staffs may be able

to recite the commander's words while remaining unclear on priorities, decision points, or acceptable risk. This is not a communication failure at the staff level; it is an integration failure at the field-grade level. Without deliberate interpretation and alignment, intent becomes noise instead of guidance. Effective field-grade officers operationalize intent by creating coherence. They frame priorities, sequence efforts, and connect guidance to systems that drive action. They ensure lateral alignment across staff sections and vertical alignment with subordinate units. Much of this work occurs outside formal forums, through deliberate conversations that build consensus and reduce ambiguity before it becomes friction.

When intent is operationalized well, execution feels intuitive. Leaders understand how their actions contribute to the whole. Trust grows because expectations are clear and consistent. Over time, commanders gain confidence that their vision will be carried forward accurately, even in their absence. That confidence is the product of shared understanding, and it is one of the most valuable contributions a field-grade officer can provide.

Rule 3: Build Systems as Canopies, Not Fire-and-Forget

"Assessment completes the operations process." –FM 6-0

Organizations do not sustain effectiveness through effort alone; they sustain it through systems that are deliberately designed, continuously assessed, and routinely refined. Field-grade officers who understand this create endurance. Those who do not rely on personal energy, which inevitably degrades over time. A canopy system provides rhythm, feedback, and continuity. It shelters multiple efforts, planning, training, readiness, and execution. Under a shared structure that allows the organization to operate despite turnover, competing demands, and surges in tempo. However, systems only remain useful if they are assessed. A system that is not examined regularly becomes ritual, not discipline.

Assessment is what distinguishes a living system from a static one. Effective field-grade officers constantly ask whether a system is producing the intended effect, where friction is emerging, and whether conditions have changed. They do not wait for failure to reassess. Small, routine adjustments preserve relevance and prevent collapse under pressure. A common field-grade mistake is treating systems as "set and forget." Once established, they are allowed to persist without scrutiny, even as the environment evolves. Over time, this erodes trust. Subordinates comply, but confidence fades. Meetings occur, products are generated, yet outcomes stagnate.

Systems also mature over time. Majors refine immature systems through disciplined assessment. Lieutenant colonels enforce standards and consistency. Colonels redesign systems when purpose or context shifts. Field grades who understand this lifecycle resist constant reinvention and instead focus on thoughtful improvement. The true measure of a system is not how impressive it appears on paper, but whether it continues to function and adapt after you depart. That adaptability is the product of continuous assessment, and it is a hallmark of professional field-grade leadership.

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Rule 4: Think in Time — Concurrent, Sequential, or Both “Commanders and staffs use time as a weapon.” –FM 6-0

Time is the Army’s most constrained and least recoverable resource. At the field-grade level, managing time is no longer about personal efficiency; it is about stewarding time for the entire organization. How field-grade officers’ structure, protect, and sequence time directly affects readiness, morale, and decision quality. Effective field grades think in time, not just in tasks. They understand which efforts must occur concurrently and which must be sequenced deliberately. Planning, resourcing, and execution often overlap, and without deliberate synchronization, organizations become overloaded and reactive. Poor temporal management rarely appears as a single failure; it accumulates quietly through excessive meetings, compressed timelines, and constant reprioritization.

Field-grade officers also manage organizational energy. Every decision that consumes time carries an opportunity cost, often borne by subordinate leaders and their formations. Leaders who ignore this reality unintentionally erode trust. Conversely, field grades who protect white space, enforce priorities, and cancel low-value events signal respect for their people and confidence in their systems. Battle rhythm is therefore not an administrative function; it is a leadership tool. When designed and managed well, it creates predictability, reduces friction, and preserves cognitive bandwidth across

Mont-Saint-Michel, France June 2024: Picture LTC Neil Stark, CSM Bryan Valentine, and MAJ Kevin Brensinger. (Photo By MAJ Kevin Brensinger)



the formation. When mismanaged, it accelerates burnout and degrades judgment.

Equally important, field-grade officers must not manage time in isolation. Command sergeants major and senior noncommissioned officers serve as the pulse of the formation and an essential sanity check on tempo. They see the cumulative effects of compressed timelines, excessive meetings, and constant reprioritization long before those effects surface in metrics or readiness reports. Field grades who deliberately engage their CSMs and SGMs gain an unfiltered assessment of whether time is being stewarded effectively or consumed at the expense of discipline, morale, and judgment. Ignoring that perspective risks mistaking activity for progress and urgency for effectiveness.

Commanders set direction, but field-grade officers regulate pace. In doing so, they ensure that tempo is sustained without exhausting the force—an essential balance for long-term effectiveness.

Rule 5: Bias Toward Execution “Disciplined initiative drives tempo.” –ADP 6-0

At the field-grade level, credibility is earned through action. Analysis, coordination, and refinement are essential, but they are only valuable insofar as they lead to execution. Field-grade officers must develop an instinctive bias toward action. A professional impatience with inertia and a refusal to allow uncertainty to become paralysis. This does not mean recklessness. It means cultivating a mindset that treats inaction as a decision with consequences. Field grades rarely receive perfect information or ideal conditions. Waiting for clarity often delays momentum, forces commanders to reengage, and transfers risk downward. In contrast, disciplined initiative preserves tempo and signals confidence throughout the organization.

Effective field-grade officers exhibit what can best be described as a mental violence toward action: a deliberate, controlled aggression against delay. They ask, “What can move now?” rather than “What else do we need?” They understand that most friction is resolved through contact, not contemplation. Execution creates information, reveals constraints, and enables adjustment.

A common failure at this level is mistaking caution for professionalism. Over-coordination, excessive staffing, and endless refinement erode trust and slow the organization. Subordinates lose confidence when effort does not translate into movement. Field-grade officers who consistently act within intent, with judgment become anchors of momentum. Their formations move faster not because they rush, but because they decide. Over time, this bias toward execution becomes contagious, reinforcing a culture where action, not deliberation, is the default response to ambiguity.

Rule 6: Think Integratively, Not Functionally “Integration is the arrangement of forces and capabilities to achieve the commander’s intent.” –FM 3-0

Field-grade officers are developed within functional disciplines, but they must mature beyond them. Branch, specialty, and warfighting function remain important

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foundations, yet they can no longer serve as the primary anchor for decision-making at this level. The Army does not fight by function; it fights as an integrated system. This distinction is critical. Functional excellence alone does not guarantee organizational success. In fact, it often produces friction when sections optimize independently at the expense of the whole. Plans can be technically sound and still fail when integration is absent. Field-grade officers exist to close that gap.

Thinking integratively does not mean abandoning functional expertise. It means subordinating it to purpose. Effective field grades retain deep competence in their lanes while deliberately stepping outside them to understand how people, processes, and priorities interact across the organization. They ask how actions in one area create effects, intended or unintended, elsewhere. Integration requires humility and curiosity. It demands listening before directing and resisting the instinct to default to one's functional solution. Field grades must be comfortable operating without owning every detail, trusting specialists while ensuring alignment among them.

This work is primarily horizontal leadership. Authority alone rarely achieves integration; relationships, credibility, and shared understanding do. When integration is effective, friction diminishes, and execution accelerates. When it is absent, misalignment compounds quietly until it becomes visible through missed timelines, duplicated effort, or commander reengagement. For field-grade officers, functional expertise opens the door, but integration is what allows them to lead effectively once inside

Rule 7: Develop the Next Generation

"Leaders develop others by preparing them for future roles."
–ADP 6-22

The most important thing a field-grade officer does is develop the next generation of leaders. Plans, systems, and products matter, but they are temporary. People endure. At this level of leadership, development is not an additional task, it is the central obligation. From the moment a field-grade officer assumes a position, they are not owning a role; they are renting a call sign. Every staff section, command post, and leadership position will be filled again, often sooner than expected. The measure of success is not how indispensable an officer becomes, but how prepared the organization is for the next person to step in and succeed.

This mindset requires deliberate action. Field-grade officers must identify potential early, create opportunities for growth, and accept short-term inefficiency in exchange for long-term capability. Developing others means allowing subordinates to make decisions, experience friction, and learn under supervision rather than shielding them from risk. It is easier to do the work oneself; it is more important to teach others how. Leader development at this level is personal and contextual. Coaching refines performance. Mentoring shapes judgment. Sponsorship creates opportunity. Field grades must be intentional about all three, recognizing that different leaders require different investments. Development is not about cloning oneself; it is about cultivating leaders who can think independently and act decisively within intent.

Succession planning is not a bureaucratic exercise; it is a combat multiplier. Organizations that develop depth can absorb loss, friction, and transition without losing effectiveness. Those that do not become brittle, relying on a small number of individuals to compensate for institutional weakness. Field-grade officers are uniquely positioned to shape this depth. They see talent across time, not just in moments of performance. They understand which experiences prepare leaders for greater responsibility and which merely keep them busy. By deliberately rotating opportunities, exposing subordinates to complexity, and providing honest feedback, field-grade officers ensure the organization is never dependent on a single personality or presence.

Development at this level is also an ethical obligation. Leaders who hoard knowledge or avoid developing successors in order to remain indispensable undermine the profession. True stewardship requires preparing others to succeed—even if that success eventually surpasses one's own. A common failure among field-grade officers is treating development as optional when time is scarce. This is a false economy. Organizations that neglect development accumulate fragility, forcing leaders to compensate later through control and oversight. Conversely, formations that invest early gain depth, resilience, and adaptability. Ultimately, stewardship defines success at this rank. Field-grade officers pass through positions, but their influence remains in the leaders they leave behind. Preparing others to rent the call sign after you is not just responsible leadership it is the highest expression of professional service.

Rule 8: Play the Long Game

"Readiness is both physical and psychological." –FM 7-22

The field-grade years are a slog. The pace is relentless, the expectations are ambiguous, and the margin for error is narrow. Unlike earlier stages of service marked by clear milestones and visible wins, field-grade officers often operate in sustained pressure with little external validation. Endurance, not intensity, becomes the decisive factor. Playing the long game requires intentional investment in mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. The Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) philosophy recognizes that readiness is not achieved through physical training alone. Cognitive resilience, emotional regulation, and purpose are equally essential. Field-grade officers who ignore



Grafenwoehr, Germany November 2024: Staff Dinner at the BN XO's house with families. (Photo by MAJ Kevin Brensinger)



Baltimore, Maryland, June 2021: Our family the night before our PCS overseas to begin my first KD pipeline. (Photo by MAJ Kevin Brensinger)

these dimensions eventually pay for it through diminished judgment, strained relationships, or burnout.

There is a persistent myth that exhaustion is evidence of commitment. At the field-grade level, this belief is not only false, it is dangerous. Burnout degrades decision-making, shortens tempers, and erodes trust. Leaders who run themselves into the ground often do the same to their organizations. Stewardship of the force begins with stewardship of self. Playing the long game does not mean slowing down indiscriminately. It means choosing presence over balance, sustainability over sprinting. It requires setting boundaries, modeling healthy behaviors, and recognizing when recovery is a leadership action rather than a personal indulgence. Field-grade officers set the tone, whether intentionally or not.

Ultimately, the Army depends on field-grade officers to provide continuity through turbulence. Those who endure do so not by ignoring the cost of service, but by managing it deliberately. Preserving oneself, and one's people, ensures readiness is sustained, not consumed. That endurance is not weakness; it is professional discipline.

Final Thought — The Field-Grade Ethos

The field-grade years are not defined by rank, command, or visibility. They are defined by responsibility. This is the stage of service where officers are entrusted with translating vision into action, preserving tempo without exhaustion, and sustaining trust across an organization that rarely slows down. The rules outlined here are not techniques; they are disciplines designed to help officers endure and lead effectively through that responsibility.

Taken together, these rules describe a way of thinking, not a checklist. They demand judgment over reflex, stewardship over ownership, and influence over authority. Identifying implied tasks prevents friction before it surfaces. Operationalizing intent builds shared understanding and trust. Building and assessing systems creates continuity beyond any one leader. Managing time deliberately preserves readiness. Biasing toward execution sustains momentum. Thinking integratively prevents functional excellence from becoming organizational failure. Developing others ensures the profession outlives the individual. Playing the long game preserves the force.

None of this work is glamorous. Much of it is invisible. Success often looks like the absence of problems rather than the presence of praise. Yet this is precisely why field-grade leadership matters. When these disciplines are applied consistently, organizations move with purpose, leaders grow with confidence, and commanders can look forward rather than constantly backward.

Field-grade officers do not own their positions; they rent them. Their obligation is not to perfect the role for themselves, but to leave it stronger for the next leader who steps in. That obligation, to the people, the organization, and the profession, is the essence of the field-grade ethos. When these rules are lived, not merely understood, vision moves at the right speed.

The Army cannot afford to treat the field-grade years as a period of mere endurance. This is the rank cohort where institutional knowledge is consolidated, culture is reinforced, and the next generation of senior leaders is shaped. When field-grade officers are unsupported, burned out, or misaligned, the effects reverberate far beyond any single unit or mission. These rules exist to preserve more than effectiveness; they exist to preserve the profession. They demand judgment, restraint, and moral courage in equal measure. They remind officers that leadership at this level is less about visibility and more about responsibility, less about personal success and more about institutional continuity.

The Army's future readiness depends on field-grade officers who understand that their greatest contribution may never be visible but will always be felt.

And when clarity exists, velocity follows.

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