

Received: June 5, 2026 | Accepted: July 5, 2026 | <https://doi.org/10.65832/mcrslasc>

Human Performance Leadership Lessons from Army Ranger School

Mark Christiani, MSSM, NSCA-CSCS, NSCA-RSCC
O2X Human Performance Integration Manager for the East Coast

Keywords: Followership; Humility; Teamwork; Communication; Credibility; Integrated Preparation

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Mark Christiani's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Army, United States Military, or O2X.

Abstract

Army Ranger School is world renowned for its physical and mental demands, but its deeper value is the leadership lessons that it exposes under stress. The course forces students to lead, follow, communicate, and make decisions while tired, uncomfortable, and uncertain. Those same lessons apply directly to human performance leaders working in tactical, public safety, and high-performance settings, where trust is earned, resources are limited, and conditions are rarely perfect. This article connects Ranger School lessons—like humility, followership, teamwork, simple communication, resilience, and decision-making under pressure—to the daily work of coaches and human performance professionals. Effective human performance leadership is not only about technical knowledge; it is about building credibility, serving the mission, adapting when the plan changes, and staying useful when the environment is messy.

Introduction

Ranger School has a reputation that often gets reduced to toughness. People talk about the lack of sleep, the hunger, the long movements, the weather, and the misery. I experienced all of those things when I went through it in 2016. They are real, and they are part of what makes the course memorable. The United States (US) Army describes Ranger School as its premier small-unit tactics and leadership course, built around training that places students in physically and mentally demanding environments while they lead under tactical conditions.¹ The course exists to test and develop leadership in an environment where comfort is removed, discomfort is inserted, and performance still matters.

The most important lessons that I took from Ranger School were not ultimately about being tough. They were about being useful when things are hard. They were about learning how to lead when you are not at your best, how to follow when

someone else is in charge, how to communicate when people are tired, and how to earn trust when everyone around you is under pressure. A recent article by Alexcia Ruper emphasized that the course develops more than tactical ability. It pushes the students to lead through adversity while building confidence, cohesion, and trust across teams.²

Ranger School provides a useful lens for human performance leadership, not only for those who will operate as part of the tactical population but also for those working in sport and health. This relevance does not mean that coaches should try to recreate Ranger School; they should not. After all, human performance professionals are not in the business of creating unnecessary suffering. The point is not to starve people, deprive them of sleep, or confuse hardship with development; the point is that Ranger School exposes leadership lessons that apply anywhere performance, trust, and pressure meet.

Human performance leaders work in messy environments. The schedule changes. The mission changes. The athlete, Service member (SM), firefighter, police officer, or industrial worker does not always show up recovered, motivated, or ready to train. The organization may not fully understand what human performance can provide. Leaders may want outcomes without knowing what inputs are needed. The coach may have expertise but no authority. The clinician may have the right answer but limited access. The program manager may have a vision but not yet have trust from the team.

The presence of these inconvenient realities is where leadership actually starts. Technical knowledge is necessary, but it is not enough. The human performance leader must earn influence before they can create change. That influence is built through humility, consistency, communication, followership, and the ability to make good decisions when the setting is imperfect. Those are Ranger School lessons. They are also human performance lessons.

Ranger School Overview

Ranger School is sixty-two days of continuous hardships, graded events, and induced human factors. Ranger School is divided into three phases. The first phase is "Darby Phase," which is twenty-

one days and is the phase where the students do the most intense physical training sessions designed to see who is mentally and physically fit enough to continue in the course. The second phase (twenty days) is "Mountain Phase," where the students are tested to thrive in the mountains, running simulated missions on minimal sleep and food. The third phase is "Swamp Phase," where the students must endure the swamps in Florida, running simulated missions, after already grinding through forty-one days of induced human factors. The most notable attribute of Ranger School is not the human factors (lack of food, sleep, recovery), but the fact that no student has any rank. It does not matter if you are an officer, a non-commissioned officer, a private, have earned the Special Forces tab, have seen combat, etc. All that matters is that you meet the standard and make the team better each active hour of the sixty-two-day course.

Ranger School as a Leadership Pressure Cooker

Ranger School is often called a leadership school, but another way to understand it is as a leadership pressure cooker. The tactics provide the structure, but the environment reveals a lot about the person. Students are placed in positions of responsibility while they are

tired, hungry, uncomfortable, and surrounded by peers who are experiencing the same stress.

An article from *Infantry Magazine* on the evolution of Ranger School explains that, regardless of rank, students learn a great deal about themselves through the process.³ The journal *Company Leader* makes a similar argument, describing Ranger School as a place where junior leaders discover their strengths and weaknesses through extended simulated combat operations and very much non-simulated stress.⁴ That idea matters for human performance. In this field, leadership is often myopically and inaccurately judged by what someone knows. Certifications, degrees, job titles, and technical models all matter, but they do not fully answer the question of whether someone can lead. The better question is what happens when the plan breaks, the room is not bought in, the schedule falls apart, or the person in front of you does not care about your perfect program.

Leadership is demonstrated when the plan changes and you can still keep the work moving in the right direction. It is demonstrated when you stay professional after getting frustrated, communicate clearly instead of overcomplicating the message, and serve the organization before trying to be recognized by it.

Ranger School strips away comfort, is strategically calculated to cause failure, and dismantles every participant's ego. Human performance challenges strip away ego in a different way. You may be the expert in the weight room, clinic, classroom, or team room, but the organization decides whether your expertise becomes useful. That usefulness depends on your ability to build trust.

Lesson One: Humility Creates Access

One of the most common lessons that people associate with Ranger School is humility. Students quickly learn that prior success does not protect them from failure in the present. I learned this myself after breezing through Darby (the first of three phases of Ranger School) and then needing a third look to squeak by in mountains (the second phase of Ranger School). Rank, background, strength, fitness, and confidence may help, but they do not guarantee success. A leadership reflection from Charles Buchanan described Ranger School as a place that teaches humility and perseverance, because it forces people to face reality.⁵

Human performance leaders need that same lesson. A coach can walk into a unit, department, or organization with the right answer and still lose the room if

they move faster than the relationship allows. In tactical and public safety settings, people are not only evaluating the program. They are evaluating the person delivering it. They want to know whether the coach understands the job, respects the culture, and is there to support the mission before trying to change the system.

One of the easiest mistakes to make as a young coach is showing up and immediately deciding that everything that could be better. The warm-up is not ideal. The lifting program is outdated. The running volume is too high. The nutrition habits are poor. The recovery culture is almost nonexistent. The temptation is to try to start fixing everything right away. The problem with that approach is that being right does not automatically give someone influence.

The first job is not to prove how smart you are. The first job is to become useful. This necessity may mean spending the first few weeks observing more than talking. It may mean learning the organization's language, understanding the schedule, identifying the informal leaders, and figuring out what problems people actually care about. It may mean helping with something small before asking for something big.

In my experience, the fastest way to earn trust in tactical

settings is not through a perfect presentation. It is through consistent, practical support that makes someone's day easier or their job better. Humility does not mean lowering the standard. It means understanding that change requires access; and access is earned through trust.

Lesson Two: Followership Is Part of Leadership

Ranger School forces students to both lead and follow in the same environment. One patrol, you may be in a leadership position; and the next patrol, you are supporting someone else who is trying to figure it out while just as tired and hungry as you are. That rotation is one of the best parts of the course, because it makes something very clear: you cannot be a good teammate only when you are in charge. The lesson transfers directly to human performance. Strength coaches, athletic trainers, physical therapists, dietitians, mental performance specialists, and program managers all see problems through different lenses. This dynamic is the value of an integrated team, but it can also become the problem if every discipline is trying to be the main character. Kevin Shinnick describes peer leadership as influence without formal authority, which fits both Ranger School and the human performance environment.⁶ In

both places, leadership is not always about title, sometimes it is about supporting the right voice at the right time.

In a tactical setting, the client being supported does not care which discipline (i.e., strength coach, dietitians, mental performance specialists, etc.) gets credit. They care whether the team helps them feel better, move better, perform better, and stay in the fight. If an athlete is returning from injury, the strength coach may need to reinforce the clinician's restrictions instead of trying to rush the training progression. If a firefighter is dragging after overtime and poor sleep, the coach may need to reinforce recovery and fueling before pushing output. If a group is struggling with consistency, the mental performance specialist may need the rest of the team to echo the same behavior-change message rather than everyone giving separate advice.

Followership does not mean being passive. It means having the awareness and discipline to support the mission even when you are not the primary voice. It means not confusing your role with your ego. In an embedded setting, it is often what separates a collection of services from an actual human performance team.

Lesson Three: The Team Is Often the Intervention

Ranger School makes it obvious that no one gets through alone. Students depend on each other for accountability, equipment, security, navigation, motivation, and sometimes the literal push not to sleepwalk off the side of a mountain. As Ruper noted, the US Army has emphasized Ranger School's role in developing confidence, cohesion, and trust within teams.⁷ Charles Buchanan makes the same point more personally, declaring that no Ranger gets through the school alone.⁸ One of the most popular pieces of advice for passing Ranger School is, "Be a good dude. Don't quit." The idea this advice presents also applies directly to human performance. We usually talk about interventions as programs, sessions, assessments, or consults. Those things matter; but in many organizations, the team itself is the intervention. The way that the human performance staff communicates, collaborates, and shows up can result in clarity or create noise.

I have seen this cause-and-effect play out in military settings. When the coach, clinician, and dietitian are not aligned, the SM gets three separate messages. One person tells them to train harder. One tells them to back off. One tells them to eat more. None of the advice is necessarily wrong, but the delivery feels disconnected. The result is confusion, and confused people usually default

back to what they were already doing—which translates into sacrificing progress.

When the team is aligned, the experience feels different. The coach understands the injury plan. The clinician understands the training goal. The dietitian understands the schedule. The mental performance specialist understands the pressure points. The program manager understands what leadership needs to see. The SM does not feel passed around; they feel supported. That is the difference between multidisciplinary and integrated. Multidisciplinary means that multiple people are involved. Integrated means those people are working from the same intent. Ranger School teaches that a team must function when people are tired, frustrated, and under pressure. Human performance teams need the same standard. It is easy to collaborate when the calendar is open and everyone agrees. The real test is whether the team can stay aligned when the schedule is packed, injuries are up, leadership is asking questions, and the population still needs help.

Lesson Four: Communication Has to Survive Stress

Ranger School is not a good place for long, complicated speeches. Tired people need clear

and concise direction. They need to know the mission, the next step, the standard, and what matters most right now. Duncan Moore states that Ranger School emphasizes practical preparation and usable techniques rather than treating the course as if there is one perfect answer for every situation.⁹

Human performance leaders should pay attention to that. Our field often makes simple things too complicated. We can take a good idea and bury it under terminology. We turn readiness into a dashboard that no one understands and recovery into a lecture. The goal is not to dumb down the work. The goal is to make it usable.

A firefighter coming off a bad shift may not need a lecture on the autonomic nervous system. They may need to know why today's training should be adjusted and what they can do in ten minutes to start moving in the right direction. A police officer with low back pain may not need every possible biomechanical explanation. They may need a simple starting point, a reason to trust the process, and a plan that does not feel like homework. A warfighter preparing for the field may not need a perfect four-week block. They may need to know what qualities to maintain, what stressors to reduce, and how to get back on track when the event is over.

Good communication respects the environment. It does not show off the coach's vocabulary. It gives the person in the audience something that they can use. One of the best lessons that I learned in tactical coaching is that the message must be repeatable when you are not in the room. If the SM cannot explain the plan to their buddy, their supervisor, or themselves later that day, the message was probably too complicated.

"That is the difference between multidisciplinary and integrated. Multidisciplinary means multiple people are involved. Integrated means those people are working from the same intent."

Lesson Five: Make the Best Decision You Can, Then Adjust

Ranger School puts leaders in situations where they rarely have perfect information. Waiting for certainty is not an option. At some point, the leader must understand the intent, make a decision, communicate it, and adjust when the situation changes.

John Spencer argues that Ranger School should not be viewed as a classroom-style leadership school, where leadership is simply taught through lectures. Instead, students are placed in demanding tactical situations where leadership, character, and judgment are tested through action.¹⁰ The distinction in the

development process matters, because leadership is not proven by having the perfect answer in a controlled setting—it is proven when the information is incomplete, people need direction, and if one can get the team all pulling in the same direction, despite the obstacles.

Human performance leaders live in that space too. We rarely have perfect data. Wearables can be inconsistent. Readiness scores can be incomplete. Injury data may lag behind the actual problem. Training logs may not tell the whole story. A person may say that they slept fine when they clearly did not. Leadership may ask for a clean number when the reality is more complicated.

This does not mean guessing. It means knowing the difference between incomplete information and no information. Human performance leaders almost always have something to work from: how people move, how they talk, how they recover between sessions, what patterns keep showing up, what leaders keep asking about, and the individuals themselves outside of work hours. The mistake is waiting until every variable is measured before doing anything useful. In the real world, you make the best call with what you have, explain the intent, and then pay attention to what changes. If the group looks flat, adjust the session. If the same injuries keep showing up, look at the demands creating them. If a

report does not tell the full story, get closer to the floor and ask better questions.

The plan is a hypothesis. The environment gives feedback. The leader adjusts. This need to effectively respond is where human performance can learn from tactical leadership. The answer is not to be reckless. The answer is to act with intent, monitor what happens, and be willing to change course without taking it personally.

“Good communication respects the environment. It does not show off the coach’s vocabulary . . . If the SM cannot explain the plan to their buddy, their supervisor, or themselves later that day, the message was probably too complicated.”

Lesson Six: Resilience Means Staying Useful

The phrase *embrace the suck* gets used a lot in military circles. It can be helpful, but it can also be lazy. Suffering by itself is not the point. The better lesson is that discomfort does not remove responsibility.

In Ranger School, students must lead, follow, communicate, and make decisions while uncomfortable to the extreme. In human performance, leaders must do the same, albeit in a different context: the plan changes; the room is not bought in; the equipment is limited;

the schedule falls apart; leadership wants a quick answer; or the person whom you are trying to help is frustrated, skeptical, or not ready to change. Resilience in this field is not just personal toughness, it is professional reliability.

I think about this often from my time supporting Soldiers. (i.e., how can I best lead and support during times of friction, uncertainty, and a host of human factors). One of the clearest examples was a midnight Norwegian ruck march (18.64 miles with a 24.25-pound ruck). It was not a glamorous human performance setting. It was late, people were hurting, feet were getting destroyed, and the job was not to give a lecture or talk about programming theory. The job was to be useful: wrap feet, deal with blisters, hand out candy, encourage others, keep people moving, and be present when the event was hard. This kind of support builds more trust than a perfect slide deck. People remember who was there when things were uncomfortable. They remember who helped without making it about themselves. They remember who was still useful when the setting was not clean, scheduled, or convenient. Human performance professionals should not ignore burnout or glorify overwork—we should understand recovery, workload, and stress better than anyone. But we must also accept that tactical high-performance environments will never be

perfectly controlled. The leader’s job is to build systems that still function when things get messy.

*“The plan is a hypothesis.
The environment gives feedback.
The leader adjusts.”*

Lesson Seven: Reputation Moves Faster Than Your Resume

Ranger School is a peer environment; rank, billet, and experience do not matter. Your peers notice everything. They notice who carries weight, who complains, who helps, who hides, who listens, who loses control, and who can be trusted when things are hard. Reputation is built through repeated behavior.

Human performance works the same way. Your resume may get you introduced, but your behavior determines whether people keep listening. In the tactical setting, word travels fast. If you show up consistently, follow through, respect the culture, and help solve real problems, people start giving you more access. If you overpromise, talk down to people, chase credit, or act differently around leadership than you do on the weight room floor, people notice that too.

This is where a lot of human performance professionals underestimate the job. Many think that credibility comes from the degree, the certification, the

model, experience, or the presentation. Those things matter, but credibility is usually built in smaller moments. It is built when you remember what someone told you last week. It is built when you modify a session instead of forcing the plan. It is built when you protect someone's confidence. It is built when you tell leadership the truth without throwing the individual under the bus. It is built when you keep showing up after the initial excitement of the program wears off.

Reputation becomes a performance tool because it changes what people are willing to tell you. A trusted coach hears about pain earlier. A trusted clinician gets people before the issue becomes a bigger injury. A trusted human performance team gets invited into conversations that they would otherwise never know were happening. This kind of access does not come from branding. It comes from repeated behavior that others can count on.

For human performance leaders, the lesson is simple: the organization is always watching how you operate. Not in a paranoid way, but in a practical way. People are deciding whether you are useful, whether you are safe to be honest with, and whether your program is worth their time. Build that reputation on purpose. Be consistent. Be useful. Be the same person in the

staff meeting, the weight room, the clinic, and the hallway. Consistency is what turns a role into influence. Lastly, do not rely on the SM coming to you; you must be the one to go to the SM. Remember, you are trying to join their culture, not the other way around.

Practical Applications for Human Performance Leaders

There are many ways we can apply the pressure cooker of Ranger School to the human performance professional. The first application is to observe before trying to overhaul. When entering a new organization, spend time learning how the place actually works. Watch the schedule. Learn the language. Identify the informal leaders. Ask what has already been tried. Find the daily friction points. A technically average solution that fits the environment will usually beat a perfect solution that cannot be reasonably installed and—as a result—no one will use.

The second application is to make the message repeatable. Human performance professionals should be able to explain the purpose of a training block, recovery strategy, nutrition habit, injury plan, or readiness metric in plain language. If the person cannot repeat the message later, then it was probably not clear enough. The

purpose may then be lost and while the intent may not fail outright it will not be as effective as it could be.

The third application is to build real integration across disciplines. A human performance team should not feel like separate services competing for attention. The coach should understand enough about the return-to-duty plan to reinforce it. The clinician should understand enough about training to help progress the person back into the group. The dietitian should connect fueling to the actual demands of the job. The mental performance specialist should help the team understand behavior, confidence, stress, and adherence. The program manager should keep everyone aligned to the mission.

The fourth application is to treat trust as a performance variable. Trust may be hard to measure, but it changes everything. A trusted coach gets better information. A trusted clinician gets earlier referrals. A trusted team gets more access. A trusted program gets more chances to influence behavior before problems become bigger. Stephen M. R. Covey states that “there is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world—one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most

powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love . . . That one thing is trust.”¹¹

The fifth application is to build systems for imperfect conditions. Programs should not work only when attendance is high, equipment is available, and the schedule is stable. Tactical and public safety populations need options for limited time, low equipment, high fatigue, shift work, travel, field conditions, and return from injury. The goal is not rigid perfection; the goal is flexible structure.

Conclusion

Ranger School is not a human performance model, and it should not be copied as one. The value is not in recreating hunger, sleep deprivation, or hardship; it is in studying what pressure reveals about leadership.

The lessons that stay with people after Ranger School are not only tactical, they are human. Be humble enough to learn the environment. Be disciplined enough to follow when someone else has the lead. Build teams that can function under stress. Communicate in a way that people can actually use. Make the best decision that you can with the information available. Stay useful when

the setting is imperfect. Protect your reputation through repeated behavior.

For human performance leaders, those lessons matter every day. They show up in the weight room, clinic, classroom, firehouse, team room, station, and staff meeting. The best leaders in this field are not just the ones with the best technical answers. They are the ones who can earn trust, support the mission, and help the people around them perform when the environment is messy, which may be the most transferable lesson from Ranger School to human performance: leadership is not proven when everything is controlled—it is proven when people are tired, the plan changes, resources are limited, and the team still needs someone to help move the mission forward. Ranger School is not for the faint of heart, but neither is being a leader day in and day out in human performance.



Author Biography

Mark A. Christiani is the O2X East Coast Human Performance Integration Manager, and Special

Operations Army Veteran. He has human performance experience in the worksite wellness, collegiate, and tactical settings. Mark holds a master of science in Sports Medicine from Georgia Southern University and several certifications, including the National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA's) Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist certification and the NSCA's Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach Certification. Previously, he served as the O2X contracted on-site Human Performance Specialist with the US Army Reserve Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) System in Florida, an H2F Contracted Brigade lead strength and conditioning coach for the 44th Medical Brigade on Fort Liberty, adjunct exercise science lecturer at Georgia Southern University, assistant strength and conditioning coach at Savannah State University, football strength and conditioning intern at the University of South Carolina, and human performance specialist at MetLife.

References

1. Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, "U.S. Army Ranger School Student Information," U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, accessed June 5, 2026. <https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/ARTB/student-information/>.

2. Alexcia Ruper, "Ranger School: Developing Lethal, Cohesive Teams," *U.S. Army*, August 14, 2025. https://www.army.mil/article/287839/ranger_school_developing_lethal_cohesive_teams.
3. Peter C. Vangjel and Michael Filanowski, "The Evolution of Ranger School: Supporting the Squad as the Foundation of the Decisive Force," *Infantry Magazine*, U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence. <https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine/spotlight/ranger/Vangjel.html>.
4. David W. Parmly, "Ranger is not a Leadership School: An Education in Self Discovery," *The Company Leader*, October 30, 2020. <https://companyleader.themilitaryleader.com/2020/10/30/ranger-school-a-course-in-self-discovery/>.
5. Charles Buchanan, "What I Learned About Leadership from Ranger School: Part 1," *Lead Read Today*, Fisher College of Business, The Ohio State University, February 16, 2018. <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/blog/what-i-learned-about-leadership-from-ranger-school-part-1>.
6. Kevin Shinnick, "Lessons Learned in Peer Leadership," *From the Green Notebook*, June 25, 2021. <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2021/06/25/lessons-learned-in-peer-leadership/>.
7. "Ranger School: Developing Lethal, Cohesive Teams."
8. Charles Buchanan, "What I Learned About Leadership from Ranger School: Part 2," *Lead Read Today*, Fisher College of Business, The Ohio State University, February 20, 2018. <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/blog/what-i-learned-about-leadership-from-ranger-school-part-2>.
9. Duncan W. Moore, "A Lieutenant's Guide to Ranger School," *Infantry Magazine*. U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence. <https://www.benning.army.mil/INFANTRY/Magazine/spotlight/ranger/Moore.html>.
10. John Spencer, "Ranger School Is Not a Leadership School," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, December 6, 2016. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/ranger-school-not-leadership-school/>.
11. Stephen M. R. Covey, with Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (NY: Free Press, 2018), 1.



O2X Human Performance provides comprehensive, science-backed programs to hundreds of public safety departments, federal agencies, and the military. O2X works with clients to elevate culture, improve mental and physical wellbeing, support healthy lifestyles, and reduce healthcare costs associated with injuries and illnesses. Driven by results and cutting-edge research, O2X programs are designed and delivered by a team of Special Operations veterans, high level athletes, and hundreds of leading experts in their respective fields of human performance.