Q&A with Brandon Lopez-Guzman, United States Marine Corps Small Unit Leader: Learning to Lead in the Moment

By Brandon Lopez-Guzman with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/bllv3816

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Brandon Lopez-Guzman's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Marine Corps or the United States Military.

Introduction

Brandon Lopez-Guzman graduated from Recruit Training Paris Island, earning the title of United States Marine, in September 2014. Following graduation from Paris Island, Brandon reported to School of the Infantry-East, to attend Infantry Training Battalion, where he earned the Military Occupational Specialty of 0311, Rifleman. Brandon then reported to Lima Company, 3d Battalion, 8th Marines in December 2014.

During his first workup and deployment, Brandon served as the platoon's radio operator, where he was expected to not only perform as a rifleman but also perform the routine maintenance, programming, troubleshooting, and accountability of the platoon's radios. As the platoon's radio operator, Brandon was not a leader over other Marines and was primarily co-located with the platoon commander during training events. After his first deployment with 3d Battalion, 8th Marines, Brandon (now a lance corporal; the third enlisted rank) rotated to a different platoon within Lima Company and became "general population," also known as "GP." Meaning that he did not have a leadership billet. During the company's first field event, Brandon's squad leader was removed from the company. His new platoon sergeant knew that Brandon was the radio operator in a different platoon on the prior deployment, thus assumed that being next to the platoon commander for a workup and deployment, Brandon *might understand tactics*. Therefore, during the first field exercise in a new platoon, Lance Corporal Lopez went from "GP," bypassed the team leader position (typically held by a corporal), and went right into the squad leader position (typically held by a sergeant).

The next eighteen months would require Brandon to learn how to lead in the moment with numerous challenges. First, Brandon was new to the platoon, thus did not have established credibility. Second, other than the billet (position), Brandon had no positional power over his Marines (i.e., was the same rank, had not graduated advance infantry courses, did not have more deployments, etc.), and would be leading his peers. Third, Brandon had not had any leadership responsibilities for the first two years in his Marine Corps' career, and he went from being primarily responsible for himself and radios to being responsible for twelve other Marines. Fourth, Brandon was filling the role of a sergeant. The Marine Corps believes the backbone of the Marine Corps is their non-commissioned officers (corporals and sergeants), and much autonomy and expectation is placed upon the corporals and sergeants; however, Brandon did not have the rank, training, education, or experience, but was being tasked with performing their role.

Brandon would, however, overcome all the obstacles before him and become a phenomenal squad leader, meeting all the expectations of that of a sergeant. Each field event, fire and maneuver range, and training week would cause Brandon to learn new aspects of the job, always in the moment. This Q&A seeks to learn from Brandon on what made him successful and one of the best squad leaders in the battalion.

When you went from being "GP" to squad leader, what were your initial emotions? Were you ready to be completely responsible for twelve other Marines?

My initial emotions were a mixture of anxiety, joy, pride, and adrenaline. The squad leader billet is what the majority of every 0311, Marine Rifleman strives for in their career. While I found myself in that role in an unorthodox manner, I was genuinely ecstatic. Very quickly, the daunting feeling of tremendous responsibility set in and it was time to start executing. Throughout my training, we were constantly preached to understand and learn the job of the billet above you. Once you have achieved that, then learn that of the next position. In doing so, you will grow as a rifleman, understand the larger picture, and be able to fill in when needed.

That time finally came to fruition and while I was filled with anxiety, I made sure those emotions did not overtake my desire to be successful. I vividly remember walking back to my pack, taking a seat, glancing around at the platoon, and thinking "am I actually ready for this?" I knew there was a lot that I did not know about how to run a rifle squad, but I took solace in knowing that the leadership above me saw potential in me. After some quick self-reflection, I felt confident in my skillset, abilities, knowledge, and truly believed I was an asset to my platoon.

Fortunately for me, during my time as a platoon radio operator, my platoon commander, Lieutenant Evans, always took the time to explain the "why" to me. *This is why we are pursuing this course of action; this is why we are moving in this formation; this is why I went with this course of action when things went wrong; this is why mastering basics makes you proficient.* Lieutenant Evans did a fantastic job at mentoring me, teaching me to slow down, and ultimately painting the big picture for me. So, with that, I promised myself I would tackle the challenge head on- each day. I was not about to quit on myself, and I refused to give up on the Marines beside me.

How did you initially approach leading your peers who really did not know you?

My standard method of approaching obstacles was to break it down to its simplest form and understand the "why." My peers are young men just like me, so to gain their trust and buy in I must prove to them that I am reliable, approachable, and qualified. I rounded up every peer in my



Above is Brandon Lopez-Guzman, pictured with his growing family.

squad, asked them to take a seat with me, and informed them of the changes. I spoke to them with confidence, truth, and honesty; the way I valued being spoken to, as a man and a Marine. I wrapped up the conversation by telling them that I would prove myself to them, become a squad leader that they deserved, and affirmed that every Marine in the squad is as important as me. I answered any questions/ concerns the Marines had and shook their hands one by one.

Another aspect that truly played in my favor was my presence within the company. Throughout my time with Lima Company, 3d Battalion 8th Marines, I made it an effort to meet the guys in the company regardless of how small the interaction was. I was told religiously that "there is always someone watching," so I held those words closely. I gave full effort of my abilities during training, owned up to my mistakes, and helped other Marines whenever I could. So, while not every Marine in the company knew me, I would say

the majority had some form of interaction with me. That effort of mine paid itself forward, especially in this situation.

"I was not about to quit on myself, and I refused to give up on the Marines beside me."

What was the biggest challenge(s) to initially overcome?

Looking back, I would say my largest challenge to overcome was myself. I constantly strived to better myself, whether it was in my role as a Marine or my personal life. It is an attribute that accelerated my growth in all aspects of my life, but if not appropriately balanced could be the sole trait that prevented my success. With the ambition to "perfect" oneself, comes the understanding that "perfect," is truly unattainable. That is amplified ten-fold in the infantry world where every fine detail plays a critical role; throw in the fact that I am a young Marine whose first role in leadership was the squad leader billet. Failure is inevitable, but it is a phenomenal tool for growth.

As an ambitious, young man any kind of failure stung, but it hurt even more when I made errors in my newfound squad leader role. The squad leaders around me were tremendous non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Their presence alone felt massive. Observing them lead Marines in garrison and in training was incredible. Their stoic demeanor in high stress training scenarios followed by smooth, aggressive squad actions felt like an unachievable task to me. I say all this to better paint the picture for the following: I was



Shown above is Brandon (far right) and members of his squad, training at Fort Pickett.



The above picture was taken in Spain with the United States Marines of Brandon's company conducting combined training with the Spanish military. Both Spanish and United States military forces are shown in this picture. Seated in the center is Corporal Cody Purciello, Brandon's first squad leader. Brandon is standing to the right, over his squad leader's left shoulder.

comparing myself to seasoned leaders of Marines. I had to learn to trust the process and not just hear the wisdom that they passed on to me. I had to truly listen, dissect it, and implement it. No one could help me after that; it was something I had to do for myself. Once I had a grasp of that, I relieved myself of unnecessary, toxic pressure. I can't thank those leaders enough for that wisdom because it still plays a large role in my everyday life today. Those leaders were Corporal Purciello, Sergeant Parker, and Corporal Mahler.

What were some early wins as a squad leader and how did you exploit the mini successes?

Two major wins in my early days as a squad leader was a squad competition held within my platoon and a live fire squad exercise conducted by the company. The squad competition was between my squad and the two other squads in our platoon. It consisted of tactical knowledge (land navigation, weapon employment, squad tactics), physical training (squad run, pull-ups, burpees, etc.), and assembly/disassembly of weapon systems. All squads began at the same time. The event was based on speed and accuracy of completion. My squad was the first to cross the finish line closely followed by another squad. In the rush of adrenaline, we assumed we came in first, but once everything was said and done, we were found to come in a close second. We missed first place due to getting a single question wrong in our tactical knowledge portion. Being so close to first place was incredibly frustrating, yet very satisfying. The two other squad leaders were senior Marines, so being that close to taking first place was real confirmation that I was doing the *right things*. Classes that my Marines benefited from were core topics and skills to the infantry. These included hand and arm signals, formations and patrolling, task and duties to roles (pointman, automatic rifleman, grenadier), land navigation, weapon systems & employment, combat casualty care, fire & maneuver, and combat reports.

The second win was a squad live fire training exercise. It was my first live fire training event as a squad leader. I had a notebook labeled "knowledge" containing information I had been taught via one-on-one mentoring sessions, class settings, and provided to me by various leaders within the company. I used this to write my 5-paragraph order, the standardized combat operations order of the Marine Corps. I went over my order multiple times, reciting it to

myself in my barracks room until I could do it without my field book in front of me. When the time came to do it for real, I used my field book to go over general data and when it came to talk about the enemy and scheme of maneuver, I simply put my field book away. I wanted to prove to my Marines and leaders that I knew this operation in and out. My squad executed the live fire range well with valuable takeaway points. At the end, a combat hardened sergeant in my platoon approached me. He put his hand on my shoulder and began to explain how impressed he was with my 5-paragraph order, my presentation, and execution. His words meant the world to me and added fuel to my ambition. I reflected on what I did right and applied it across the board.

Being a squad leader, you were tactically responsible for twelve other Marines including live fire and maneuver. You were also responsible for their well-being, development, and growth. Which was harder, the tactical or the non-tactical aspects of being a leader?

The tactical aspect of leading and developing Marines is extremely challenging, but there are guidelines, regulations, battle drills, and standard operating procedures that point you in the direction you need to go. That is somewhat true as well when it comes to the non-tactical side, as there are mentoring and counseling programs that you can implement, but ultimately there is no real handbook for that. Furthermore, you simply are not present with your Marines twenty-four-seven. How do I, as a twenty-year-old, guide and mentor guys my age and those older than me with more life experience? Furthermore, how do I lead them in areas of their life that revolve around privacy? These are individuals that come from all walks of life, different upbringings, cultures, religious beliefs, hobbies, goals; you name it.



Shown above is Brandon Lopez-Guzman graduating Advance Infantry Course from Advance Infantry Training Battalion, School of the Infantry-East.

In my ambition to grow tactically as a squad leader, I never really considered how I would lead Marines in their personal lives. Another layer of complexity to this was that for most of the guys, this was the first time in their lives where they were earning a paycheck and had a legitimate degree of "freedom" in life. The non-tactical side of things was very challenging for me in the beginning. It's a slippery slope, a game of balance; you can either lean too far one way (too friendly or too distant) or you could blur the lines by being inconsistent in your approach.

Break bread with your Marines and be alongside them, but place parameters on it so you don't lose the aspect of chain of command. However, be cautious because if you lean too far the other way and tarnish relationships (i.e., too distant, authoritative), you will create consequences that bleed into the tactical side of performance. For example, if you're only present during work and go "ghost" on your Marines after work, then your Marines will feel like you do not have their backs. You can't foster a true relationship with your Marines that way.



Shown above is the author (right) receiving the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal as a squad leader during his second deployment.

I lived life as if my Marines were always watching me. I made an active, conscious effort to get to know them one by one. I kept myself available 24/7 as best I could, regardless of how small the topic may have been. I was also very honest, if I didn't know the best way to tackle a challenge in one of my Marine's lives, I did not hide it. I would identify another leader that could help, would take my Marine to him, and I'd stay to ensure my Marine was comfortable. I recognized the responsibility of my role. I made an active effort to prove to them that I cared about everything, not just the tactical side of things.

Your leadership style was based on positive and negative experiences of being a "boot" (i.e., new) Marine. Based off your poor leadership, how did you decide the ways in which you would not lead?

There were multiple things that I experienced early in my time as a Marine, as I'm sure many have, but I will highlight two specific points. I could not stand being treated and spoken to less simply because of my rank and time in the Marine Corps. It is not that I had thin skin; it simply did not foster the real brotherhood that the Marine Corps' Infantry so often preached. Why would I follow or look up to any Marine leader who treated other Marines less for such low-level reasons. It is toxic, ineffective, and a disservice to the next generation of Marines. I refused to treat Marines poorly, even more so for such ridiculous reasons. At some point, everyone is new and "green."

The second thing I despised was watching Marines in leadership billets escape work, pawn it off on a junior Marine, and at times even take credit for the work completed. Delegating work is appropriate at times, but to do it every time simply because "I don't want to do it," is unacceptable. There are standards in place, and no one is excluded from them. You work, perform, and behave at the same level you ask your Marines to be at every day in and out of uniform.

Based off the positive leadership you experienced, how did you try to lead?

I am the squad leader, but just because I'm in that billet now does not mean I would be in it tomorrow. I made it an effort to perform for my Marines above the standard that I held them at in each task. I constantly worked to prove myself to both the Marines under my charge and my leadership. This was a characteristic that my first squad leader, Corporal Purciello, demonstrated.

As a young Marine growing up in the infantry, leadership through example meant a great deal. Corporal Purceiello wanted us to constantly prove ourselves in the squad, and he was doing the same for us. He committed his word to us as truth. If he said he would do it, he would always follow through.

Everyone in Corporal Purciello's squad truly had a voice. He made sure we were afforded opportunities to speak, take on tasks, and even get chances to lead. He took the time to learn our goals, how we were feeling/doing, and what was going on in our personal lives. He cared about us professionally and personally; it was crystal clear for us. Corporal Purciello was the leader I wanted to be like when my time came and thankfully that time came.

You avoided being the constantly authoritative Marine leader. Your Marines said you knew when to listen, when to mentor, and when to be justifiably angry. What guided you in your leadership approach?

An overly authoritative figure has never made sense to me. Even more so when you are in a field where your life and health heavily depend on the individuals around you. The Marine Corps prides itself on many things and generating young leaders is one of them. If you bark orders 24/7 and lead with an "iron fist," are you laying the foundation for a confident, productive Marine? The answer is no. You are making "robots," fostering a toxic culture, encouraging micromanagement, and ultimately creating Marines that cannot make independent decisions.

My method was simple, repeatable, and consistent, which made it effective both in training and garrison. Treat the Marines like the men they are. The same way I treated my peers and those of higher rank was the same way I treated my junior Marines. I did not blur the lines of rank; I simply spoke and treated all my Marines with the same level of respect. Failure and mistakes are inevitable; the critical factor is why did it happen? Was there good intention, an understandable attempt to solve problems, and did they take accountability? If so, fantastic, as that is the purpose of training and a great opportunity to educate and mentor. Or was it the opposite; did the Marine attempt a shortcut, were they deceitful, and were they avoiding accountability? This too is a great opportunity to educate and mentor but requires a firm and direct reaction.

I made it clear to my Marines that I would never degrade them or talk down to them, but that did not mean that I would not hold them accountable. Sometimes that meant getting angry, but it was not a tool I relied on for most errors. I had a standard in my squad and held every Marine to it equally. I proved to them that I cared about them. In turn they were willing to go above and beyond for me and each other.



Shown above is the author (third from right) on his second deployment, where he served as an infantry rifle squad leader. Brandon completed the entire deployment serving as the squad leader, which was a position above his rank the entire eighteen months. During this period, he could rarely use his positional rank (lance corporal or corporal), as he was leading many of his peers. Brandon's squad's success was in direct correlation to his leadership.

What advice would you give to a new Marine or warfighter currently not in a leadership position to help prepare them for being a leader?

I would tell them to "master" the basics, search for opportunities to learn new things in your field/military occupational specialty, be hungry, and always be a good student. There are many qualities that make a leader a good one, but there are a few defining characteristics that make you a great leader. These four actions are not the entirety of it, but they are ones that will aid you in becoming successful.

How can you expect to task/delegate a Marine with something you cannot execute flawlessly yourself? How can you lead others if you're not willing to achieve well–roundedness in all aspects of your profession? How can you take charge if you are not hungry and driven for success? How can you mentor if you are not willing to learn? Ask yourself those questions every day.

What advice would you give to a new leader who is new to a leadership role?

Embrace the opportunity and face it head on. Understand that you will encounter difficulties throughout the entirety of it, but you will also experience profound fulfillment and make legitimate memories. Don't shy away from the challenges that will arise and apply yourself fully. Be proactive, humble, and strong. For yourself and for the individuals you will take under your charge. Seek growth in any way you can. To be a great leader, you must be just as good as a student. Dig deep, prove to yourself, your leaders, and your Marines that you are in fact the right person for the job. In doing all these elements, I can assure you that the fruits of your labor will become evident.

"Don't shy away from the challenges that will arise and apply yourself fully. Be proactive, humble, and strong. For yourself and for the individuals you will take under your charge."

If you could do it over again, what would you do differently and what would you do the same?

It is difficult to say what I would do differently when I look back because of how things worked out. I was far from being the best; however, I truly feel proud of what I accomplished. If I had to boil it all down to one thing I would change, I would be more proactive to identify and locate additional training and courses I could have sent my Marines to with approval from higher. Looking back, I thought that level of training was only available when presented from higher. There is an abundance of tactical and non-tactical courses available to us as Marines; it would have been a great boost in all contexts if I was able to coordinate additional training for the guys at that level.

Also, "if it's not broken, don't fix it." That simple, cliché phrase would have saved me a lot of time and headache. That does not mean do not make any changes you see necessary, it just means apply a true thought process to those decisions regardless of how small of a change you believe it to be. Time, place, and situation are three key factors to consider before you implement change. Beyond that, I do not believe there is anything else I would have changed. My personable approach when it came to connecting with Marines and leading them worked well for me. It provided me with real growth, success, and lifelong relationships.

"How can you expect to task/delegate a Marine with something you cannot execute flawlessly yourself? How can you lead others if you're not willing to achieve well-roundedness in all aspects of your profession? How can you take charge if you are not hungry and driven for success? How can you mentor if you are not willing to learn?"

Any final thoughts on leadership?

Leadership is by far one of the most challenging things I continue to experience in my life, yet it is hands down one of the most rewarding and purposeful positions I have had the privilege to conduct. It challenges you to try new things, critically think, problem solve, and forces you out of your comfort zone. Without that, you cannot grow.

My roles in leadership have allowed me to become a better friend, son, brother, husband, father, and follower of Christ. Do not shy away from the challenges and demand of leadership. Be humble and take the time to identify the sole reason why you are doing what you are doing in that role. Commit it to your spirit and when times get difficult, remind yourself of your "why." Leading Marines was and still is a core aspect of who I am.