Q&A with Marine Special Operator "MP": Leading Up, Down, and Laterally

By MP with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/mptcta24

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent MP's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Special Operations Command, United States Special Operations Command, or the United States Military. This article has been reviewed by two intelligence professionals with over two decades of experience and has been deemed to have no classified materials. For security reasons, only MP's initials are used.

Introduction

MP is a Marine Raider with Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC). He has over seventeen years of active-duty service, with most of his career being a Raider in MARSOC. MP has deployed across the globe to seven different countries in three different Geographic Combatant Commands, to include combat zones. His billets (task assignments) include but are not limited to being a Marine Special Operations Team (MSOT) operations chief, an MSOT senior enlisted leader (SEL), and an operational ground force commander (GFC).

Centric to MP's Q&A is a recent Special Operations Forces (SOF) deployment, during which MP began the deployment as a GFC who was responsible for three different maneuver elements. Soon after deployment initiated, a Marine of greater rank deployed with the unit and was placed as the GFC. This transition placed MP to second in command, essentially constituting a demotion in billet. This Q&A discusses the leadership portrayed by MP up, down, and laterally in the unit over the course of the six-month SOF deployment and how he used the situation to create opportunities.



Shown above is MP running a member of his Marine Special Operations Team through a course of live fire on the flat range while deployed.

When you were replaced by a Marine of greater rank, what thoughts and/or emotions did you initially have? Did you share or show any to the Marines in your team?

A few emotions or aspects that initially emerged were concern, frustration, and feeling unstable. The concern related to the question of how adding someone new to the team at that point in the process could affect team chemistry and the frustration related to the instability that comes from being plugged into billets for a short time only to be displaced and moved again. This was all from a selfish perspective and focused on myself rather than the team. A day or two after receiving the news, I knew I had to make the best of the situation and ensure, as the senior enlisted man on the team, that the team was taken care of and supported while at their locations to further United States Government objectives.

Ultimately, I kept most of my thoughts and emotions to myself, to ensure that the younger members didn't absorb any negativity through observation as I adapted to the shift in dynamics. However, I did reach out to two other senior teammates, to get an outside perspective, which led us to identify an opportunity to travel to a location that we had initially dismissed. After further mission analysis, the same location showed great potential for myself and a small element to go and conduct special operations.



Shown above is MP's team conducting testing of new tactics, techniques, and procedures for nighttime handheld mortars.

I want to highlight the importance of having someone or, better yet, a small group of trusted advisors (friends, family, mentors, etc.) around you who won't tell you what you want to hear, but rather what you need to hear. Seek truth from them; have them give you the raw truth, so that you can be better off in how you conduct yourself as a leader. Being able to talk through and bounce ideas off the two other teammates was the catalyst for the success of this deployment.

Although you wanted to change teams you were not allowed to switch. You had two basic choices—you could divide or unite the team; and you chose the latter. What choices did you make to create team unity?

Yes, originally, I wanted to take what I thought was the most logical choice (i.e., move to a new team). Since I was being replaced, I believed that moving to a new team and location would prove best for everyone. In the end, though, I was told that I was not going to be allowed to move locations. I wanted to make the best of the situation, regardless of what I thought the "right" answer might look like.

Therefore, I let the team know that this scenario represented a "we" decision, not an "I" decision. We *all* had to buy into uniting as a team and making the best of the situation. The only thing that we could control was our attitude and the decision to ensure that each member was willing to step forward, mature, and have a good attitude. At the end of the day, we get to decide

what we want our legacy to be for a deployment, and we all *decided* to make sure that we would make a positive impact for this particular deployment, regardless of what happened outside of our control. As much as I wish that I could take credit for the team's success, I can't. The team worked tirelessly to ensure we mutually supported each other and got the mission accomplished. As the senior enlisted man on the team, I was very proud of how the team banded together to make this a successful deployment.

One example of the team coming together is for one of the larger exercises that we were tasked with assisting our partners in leading. This exercise was multiple days, with multiple layers being implemented and meant to showcase the partner's capabilities in front of their higher headquarters. This led to an increased workload on the team across the entire area of operations. We had to work fifteen- to sixteen-hour days from all the training, planning, coordination, logistical support, and travel that was required to enable mission success. There were multiple times during this period we had to lean heavily on each other for support to endure the long hours, but we continued to remind each other that we just needed the military exercise to be a success for both commands and governments.

At the beginning of deployment, there were mixed feelings with the new ground force commander (GFC) joining the team. As the senior enlisted leader (SEL), what actions did you take to support the new GFC? Could the team have succeeded if you had not supported him?

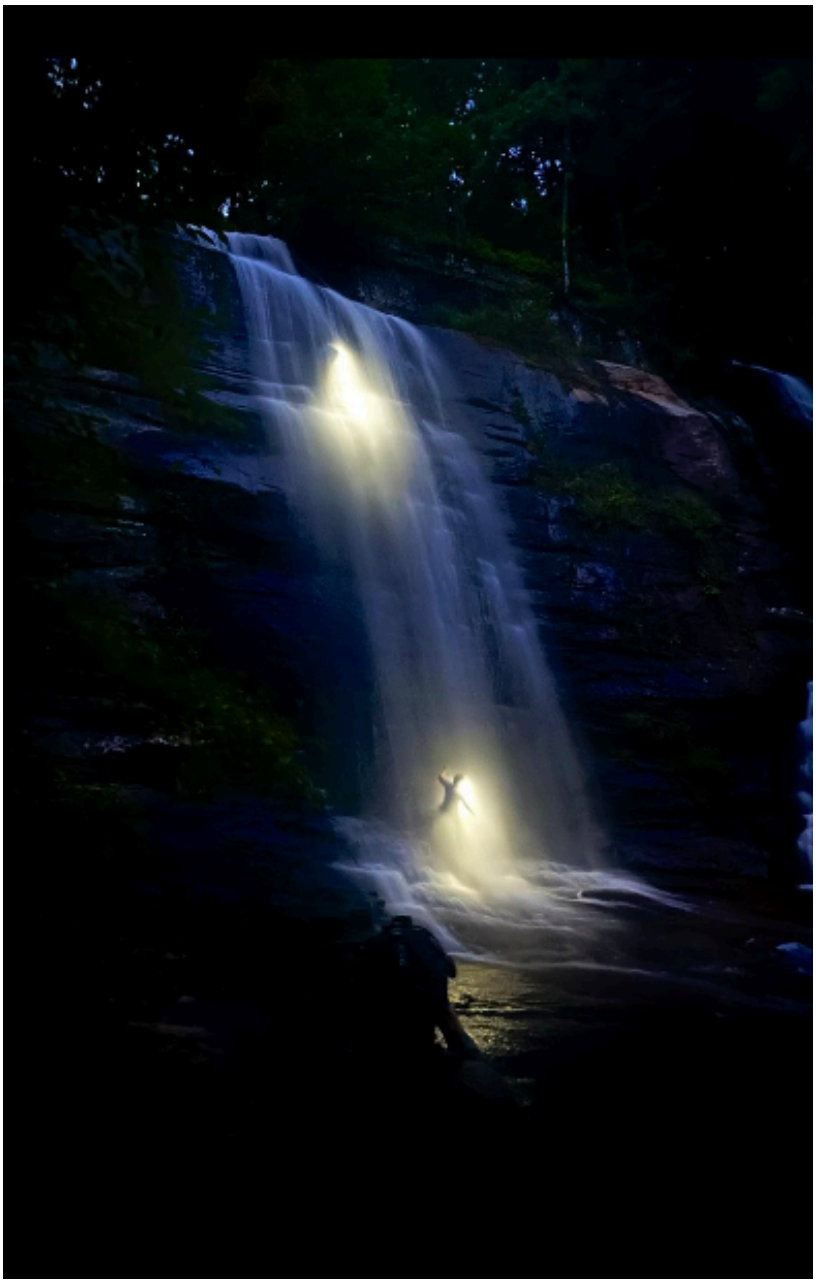
It's natural for everyone on the team to be a little hesitant when a new leader joins the team, especially under a sudden circumstance of change. The concern will always be related to what new things that individual will bring or detract from the team. After hearing all the concerns from all the members of the team, I believe that the new leader should get a chance to prove their worth to the team, regardless of circumstance, rank, or billet. My initial actions were to bring in the other team leadership (element leaders) and get their buy in to ensure that *we* as a team were successful, regardless of who was at the helm.

We would act and conduct ourselves in a manner that fostered an environment that would lead to a successful deployment. We defined success as everyone getting to further open their operational aperture and gain experience in domains that we normally would not be exposed to until higher ranks. I believe that the team would still have been successful without me or my actions being present. The original team leadership worked hard for two-plus years to ensure that the team would be successful regardless of who was in charge. As a leader, you should create a team where you can be internally replaced. I believe that the new GFC and I were able to reap the benefits of the prior team leadership's hard work.

As the SEL of the team, what specific actions did you take to effectively lead those of lower rank and billet during the deployment?

I've learned that as a leader, you set the tone and ultimately foster the framework for the rest of the team to operate in. From personal experience, I've been able to see that if you take care of the individuals on a personal level, they will take care of the mission at a professional level. Each person is looking for **purpose** and **meaning** behind the work that they do. I worked especially hard to be able to provide both elements to all members of the team. This aspect resulted in the team being cared for at a personal level (manifesting the principle of "I am my brother's keeper") and the mission being taken care of at the professional level (doing what is necessary to meet the commander's intent and end state).

Additionally, I believe that having metrics to measure yourself and your team is critical to success. I saw this utilized to a higher level by the new GFC who joined the team. I appreciated how vital it was



Shown above is MP's team rappelling down a waterfall while conducting a climbing package in the Continental United States.

to create buy in and build accountability over our deployment. For security reasons, I cannot provide specifics. However, I now implement this concept everywhere that I go. You need to have a target to strive for in order to know what your *shot group* looks like after all is said and done.

On your SOF deployment, you had two other Marines in the team of equivalent rank. While you had a higher billet, you did not outrank these individuals. How did you lead laterally those of equal rank within the team?

Leading laterally is perhaps the most difficult aspect of leadership I have encountered. I had just conducted turnover of my element with one of these individuals. First and foremost, you must bestow trust to these guys and let them know that you will have their back when representing them and their courses of action at their team locations. Second, you need to give them an objective, problem set, and end state for them to accomplish or meet. Third, you need to hold them accountable to the metrics, such as measures of effectiveness and measures of performance, that you collectively agree upon.

The above may sound easy and esoteric, but, in reality, it is difficult to execute without individuals coming at the situation without unnecessary emotion. Being a leader means that you need to sometimes have hard conversations and do the unpopular thing. Trust is also sometimes hard because higher headquarters will always create self-induced pressure and ask questions about actions being conducted at team sites and, as a leader, you must trust that your guys are doing the right thing.

Now, with regard to balancing pressure from higher headquarters and needing to trust your guys on the ground, I have learned to always go to the source and have a sit down with the guys if I have any

doubts or need more information on things. Keeping your friends accountable is always the hardest thing to do. It's easier to let things slide, but passivity takes one problem and doubles it—because, on top of the initial issue, now there is an absence of the communication needed to resolve the original problem. As a leader though, you need to lead before you are friends. You don't need to be over the top about things, but you need to let the guys know when they're slipping and there are red lines that they cannot cross if they want to be successful. You also need to allow the time and space for those individuals to come and inform you when you're slipping or getting complacent about something. This policy fosters an environment where the team is legitimately keeping itself accountable and getting better through the process.

As the SEL, you had the most operational experience within the team; however, the new GFC outranked you. How did you lead up during the deployment?

I'm not sure how well I led up during the deployment. All I could do was provide insight and experience for the new GFC. He and I ensured that we were united when it came to decisions outward to the team or to our higher chain of command. However, we had the relationship, maturity, and flexibility to disagree behind closed doors. Together, we agreed on the outcome or desired end state, but sometimes we disagreed on how we each wanted to get there. However, once a decision was made, it was essential that I supported that decision and made sure that we conveyed a united front. I worked tirelessly to ensure that the voices of the team were heard, understood, and considered while decisions were being made.

It was also my job as an SEL to provide experience and insight to the GFC while we discussed various courses of action. With three other SOF deployments of knowledge to pull from, I was able to provide context and secondary and tertiary considerations to think about while we discussed how to get after certain problem sets. This framework allowed us to pour fuel into certain efforts that we thought were important to push the limit on, while still mitigating risk to an acceptable level and ensuring that we stayed compliant with all legal, ethical, and moral factors.

Although you wanted the autonomy, ownership, and responsibility of being the GFC, by being the SEL, what were you able to take advantage of and exploit? What opportunities did you create?

As a small unit leader, I've always been taught to be at the point of friction. More often than not, this has allowed me to go to most forward locations during operations. I enjoy being able to be the one on the ground and being the individual who is at the tactical edge making decisions at that level. By being the SEL, it afforded me the opportunity to identify another location that was previously divested of by a previous team. From this, we were able to create another small element to go forward and to start answering previously identified gaps of information at this new team location.

I prefer to be on the ground at the point of friction, to include making things happen in situations that those achievements would otherwise not be feasible. This small element was able to create a myriad of options and opportunities for future teams and higher headquarters to capitalize on to further United States Government objectives. One other great benefit that came from this was the opportunities created from the relationships with the partner nation that had otherwise gone stale or were nonexistent. As these opportunities presented themselves, we as a team were able to establish a few "firsts" for that area of responsibility.

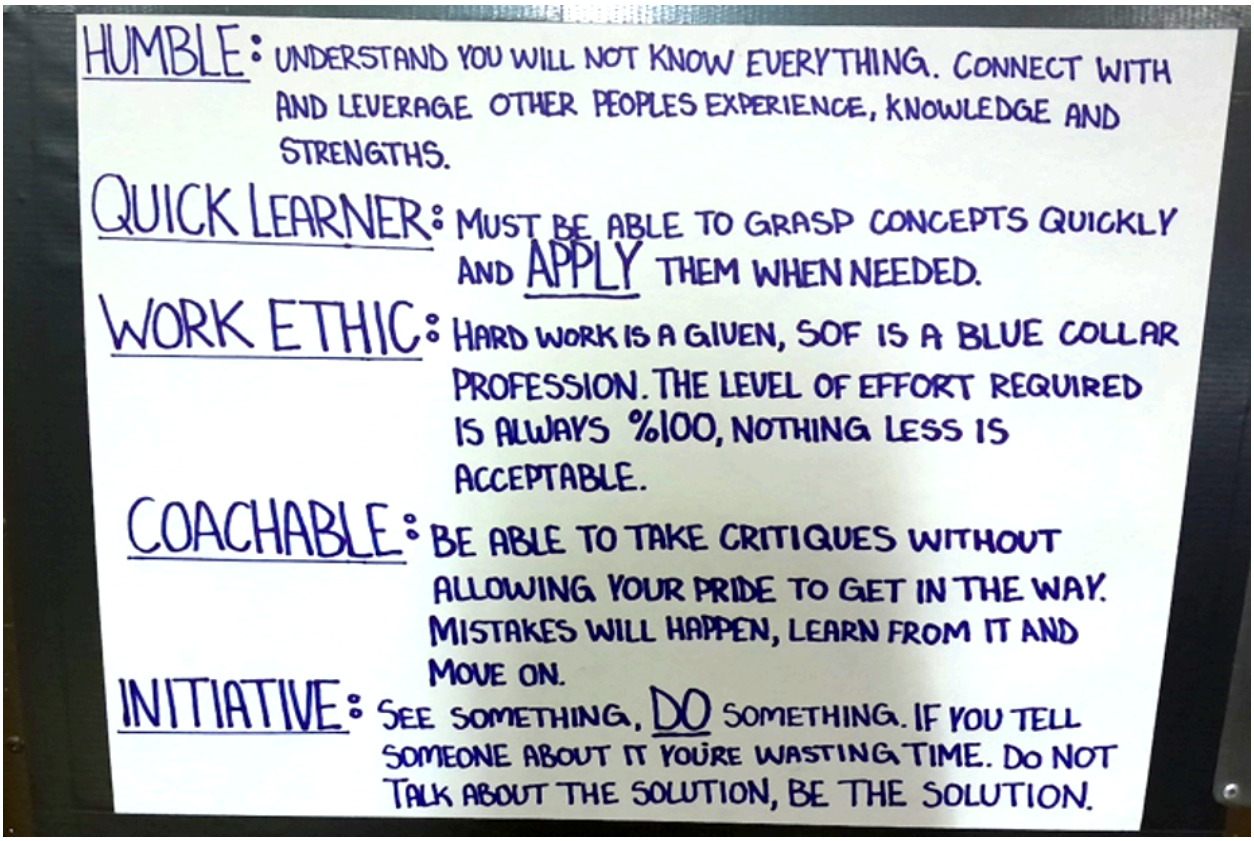
One of the areas I grew and matured while on deployment was learning the difference between point of friction and point of influence. The point of friction is where the small unit leader (i.e., enlisted Marine

leadership) moves towards to break up difficulty, resistance, confusion, etc. Think of an individual who is constantly putting out little fires before they become big fires. Point of influence is where people go to shape large decisions or enduring desired outcomes. The commander goes there to shape the battlespace through various levers that they can pull. The new GFC helped me grow into this realization as we worked together.

You were central to creation of a great culture on the deployment. What did you do to foster and sustain a winning culture?

I believe that culture is one of the most underrated tools of leadership. Culture is the environment where you breed success or failure. It's simple, but not easy. One of the things that I really hit on during the deployment was to ensure that everyone knew that they were a valuable member of the team. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. It was my job to ensure that someone's strength augmented someone else's weakness. Also, I ensured my weaknesses were covered by someone else's strengths, which is the Marine Corps' first leadership principle (i.e., know yourself and seek self-improvement).

Additionally, being able to collaborate and seek counsel from solid subject matter experts within the command was a significant contributor to the overall success of our mission. At the end of the day, ensuring the right person was put against the right problem increased our success rate and made everyone that much better. Accountability is key to creating a culture of success. At the end of the day, you either hit your target or you missed. It's binary—ones and zeros—there is no trying or attempting. You either did it, or you did not do it; it's that simple. Holding yourself and each other accountable is



The above signage was created by MP and was posted to his team house's primary door during the deployment being discussed in this Q&A. Before stepping out of the team house, this is what each team member would see.



Shown above his MP's team working with a host nation on maritime interdiction operations.

critical to ensuring that you don't allow complacency or comfort to slip in and slowly start deteriorating what was initially built and agreed upon.

"I believe that culture is one of the most underrated tools of leadership. Culture is the environment where you breed success or failure. It's simple, but not easy."

There was friction between the members of the team on deployment. As a leader, you had the ability to diffuse an atmosphere of friction. What did you do well to try to sustain unit cohesion?

Personally, I don't think that I did a great job of diffusing some of the tense situations. I did work extremely hard to guarantee that all members felt heard, understood, and knew that they were truly cared for by the team and myself. I think that even though I had to have hard conversations with some of the guys, they understood that I would do anything to make sure they were taken care of, whether they like the method or not.

By doing so, I believe that I created a level of trust and respect that went both ways. There were times that guys didn't want to talk due to emotions running high and individuals being frustrated. When that happened, I called other teammates that I knew would ensure that the individual in question knew that we were all thinking of him and supporting him the best we could. Sometimes, I wasn't the guy to ultimately diffuse certain situations. When someone else was needed, I ensured the right person was called in to diffuse and make the situation better. It is important to realign and refocus the team back to the mission on hand as quickly as possible. Not doing so can have significantly negative consequences that can set a team back; and I was not willing to allow that lack of input and intention happen on my watch.

How does the need to demonstrate leadership change with aspects such as circumstances or rank?

I think it's easy to dislike or become frustrated with the next level up in the chain of command, until you get there and must take that billet. I remember being frustrated when I was an element leader because I wanted to innovate and test out certain concepts



Shown above is a host nation force conducting a Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure training mission after being trained by MP's team.

on ranges and training exercises. Often, I received push back from my operations chief or team chief due to competing priorities or training Mission Essential Tasks.

In SOF, it is built into our culture to be the impatient professional, which is known as "push the limit safely, but if you're not failing in some capacity, you're not pushing hard enough." When I took the operations chief billet on the team, I was surprised to see how much went into all the backside logistical support and who signs off on the risk being associated with the training evolution. I didn't necessarily agree with why some leadership didn't want to push for certain training objectives, but I understood the "why" when I moved up in rank and billet.

This goes hand in hand with the nuanced difference of being and SEL and a GFC. As an SEL, I cared about getting assets to support my specific teams' operations. Whereas as a GFC, one is looking at the problem set from a higher-level perspective and identifying the priority requirements and ensuring that assets are getting appropriately assigned to those operations, even if it is not your mission as you must care about the total campaign's efforts. I want to be clear that both are needed and required to be successful, they're just different, not right or wrong.

"If you're not failing in some capacity, you're not pushing hard enough."

Any insights you would share with your younger self about leadership, encountering setbacks, or unexpected scenarios?

I would have started reading sooner; experience can be accelerated by learning through others' experiences. I would tell myself to focus on the things I have control over and be aware of—but not waste time focusing on—things that I can't influence. Solve one problem at a time. At the end of the day, all things really are just a set or system of problems that need to be solved—but don't be overwhelmed by the quantity of problems, break it down to one problem set at a time.

One of the most important things that any leader can do is to keep a good attitude when there is no reason to keep one—it changes everything. Do hard things daily, the discipline learned by doing so will be the foundation for everything else to be built on when experiencing adversity in the future. Look to serve others, and, more specifically, those you have been charged to lead. At the end of the day, you need to be able to lead yourself before you can lead others—do so accordingly.

Any final thoughts on leadership?

Jesus Christ exemplified servant leadership the best. The best leadership manual written to date is the Bible. If you are looking to be a better man, father, disciple of Christ, and servant leader, you would do well to read it.