Q&A with Marine Special Operator "NP": Turning Adversity into Opportunity

By NP with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/npvaa026

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent NP'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 NP's initials are used.

Introduction

NP is a Marine Raider with Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC), with over sixteen years of active-duty service. NP started off his career as a Marine infantryman prior to becoming a Marine Raider in MARSOC and has six deployments to four different countries in three different Geographic Combatant Commands, to include multiple combat zones.

NP's Q&A is about how to turn adversity into opportunity. Immediately prior to his most recent Special Operations Force (SOF) deployment, NP went through adversity that resulted in him switching positions within the deploying unit; a switch that he did not want to make. NP had two choices; become bitter or become better. NP chose the latter and through his own initiative began working on self-led projects in efforts to make the organization better. Over the course of several months, to include his entire six-month SOF deployment, NP assembled a team of Raiders across the globe to assist the organization in transformation. This Q&A discusses how NP turned adversity into an opportunity, and rather than become bitter, worked with his peers in an effort to make the organization better.



Shown above is NP graduating United States Army Ranger School in 2013. While a Lance Corporal (third grade of enlisted Marine), NP was selected by his Marine Corps' infantry battalion to attend Army Ranger School after having a battalion internal selection process. NP was selected to bear the course's guidon during the graduation ceremony.

When you were put into a different position within the company, what were your initial emotions? Were the Marines around you aware of how you perceived the situation?

Initially, I was very bitter. The news of this involuntary reposition was abrupt, and I felt that I had been betrayed by those who made the decision. The scenario was not that of a talent management decision, but rather a personal one. Due to inter-team conflicts, "plans changed" last minute and I was removed from the position that I had worked so hard to grow into over a year-and-a half of the intense workup for deployment. The result, for me, was a strong sense of let down; I felt that I let my teammates down—and they knew it. While I did not act out or let anger fuel my next moves, emotion was present and, to an extent, felt by those around me. It was very challenging to go back to work in the same building, with the same people, but in a new position. What helped me keep my composure was the regular contact with men whom I knew and respected. Most of my former teammates stayed in touch and checked up on me; and, to this day, I am very thankful for those actions.

You were well respected in the team that you were removed from and could have subsequently chosen to impede the unity of the team. However, you ensured that the team remained cohesive. Clearly, this was the higher (and a more selfless) road to take, but it's not one that everyone would choose. Why did you make the decision that you did?



Above is NP training convoy operations with his teammates.

As a Service member, it is not about the you; it's about the team winning as a whole. Winning in this instance meant keeping what unity was left and even trying to grow it. Adding emotion into combat is never a good strategy. I absolutely could have created division and drawn out the negative feelings, but I made the conscious decision to hold those emotions in and fight toward the next objective, which was understanding how to 'win' in my new position. The men still respected me, and even the ones who had personal issues with me still respected me in this new position and things were professional from that point forward. The focus needed to remain on what was ahead, not what was behind.

As we were deploying to a combat zone, the mission and the Marines had to come first. My personal feelings could not be in the equation. I was placed into a new role and took proactive steps to make the company better.

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Due to your new position within the company, you had increased time available to do whatever you wanted. Rather than go home early, you chose to stay later and work on self-assigned projects in efforts to make the entire organization better. What drove you to this decision?



Shown above is NP conducting medical evacuation and tactical combat casualty care training. In his spare time, NP works as an emergency medical technician to gain experience in treating casualties.

I am an innovator, entrepreneur, and connector at heart. I don't slow down—and this new position offered me maneuver space that I had never felt before in my career. To a certain extent, I was choosing my own adventure day by day. On one hand, there was a frustrated awareness that I was not where I wanted to be within the company; but on the other, I was really enjoying this newfound freedom.

This degree of liberty actually became a conflict in my mind for the first couple of months that I was overseas. Having the extra time on my hands, I decided to be a part of a new program that had been started by my unit's Senior Enlisted Advisor, which was designed to tackle organizational problems with tactical level flare. This direction fit what I could bring to the table, and I was excited to take on a new challenge.

Your company moved you to a new position prior to deployment, which required you to go to additional military schools. This change meant that for you to continue working on any self-assigned projects, you had to do so when it was not convenient—and often that meant working when others were sleeping. What sustained your drive for making a difference, especially with the knowledge that manifestation of your work would not automatically lead to implementation of your work?



Shown above is NP conducting close quarters marksmanship training.

Yes, I lost a good bit of sleep during this season of effort, but it was all worth it in the end. To be open and honest, not all of the work that I put in was 'actioned' by my unit. Not having full organizational traction was discouraging at first; but after reflecting on it, it was clear to me that there had still been much gain in the sense of "sets and reps."

For instance, I was "really" reaching out to forty, fifty, or even sixty new people in my unit; I was "really" COA [Course of Action] wargaming with colonels; and I was "really" involved in component-level decision making. All of the above points of progress or growth were notably above my pay grade, and I had the opportunity to accomplish specific feats due to an opportunistic–positive mindset. Training is often notional. However, the sets and reps of planning, COA development, wargaming, and briefing was "real" the entire time as opposed to notional, making those experiences valuable in their own right.

Many Fortune 500 CEOs would say that endurance is the number-one leadership trait. I was going to see this project through until the end, and I did. I learned a lot from that experience, and I grew as a person. Additionally, I believe that if I had not been doing all that outreach and research, then I would have been in a rather negative place and would not have emotionally grown out of being removed from my former team as well or as quickly as occurred.

On your SOF deployment, you remained diligent in your efforts to create organizational change, which required you to work long days, often coordinating with your peers across the globe. How did you keep your peers engaged knowing that decision-makers may not implement the collective work of everyone?

Enthusiasm is a leadership trait in the Marine Corps, and I kept the project exciting and focused my messaging campaign aligned to the fact that I had the ears of decision makers. The result of this approach ended up swaying three of the top colonels' opinions, which will always be an accomplishment. Unfortunately, they were not

the "ultimate" decision-makers. Nonetheless, for all of us involved, it felt good to know that people were giving us a chance and hearing us out. Good leaders will listen to ideas, even if they do not implement them; they truly listen to the opinions of others who demonstrate competence, passion, and initiative. If a leader wants to unleash their team, they need to listen to the team.

What advice would you give to someone who believes that change needs to occur but does not want to try to create change because of a belief such as "It will not make a difference anyways," or "Nobody will listen"?

Some people were designed by God to be positive disruptors and some are not. Now, let us be clear—we should not confuse complaining, sabotage, or hindering a leader's vision with being a positive disruptor. Those individuals are toxic, harmfully hinder the team's unity for selfish reasons, and are negative disruptors. Some people lack humility and do not understand their role within a team and when their plans are not executed, they will negatively disrupt the team to prove a point. These individuals are immature amateurs, not professionals.

Positive disruptors are individuals who understand the vision, intent, and mission of the leader and organization, and who through unity of effort, disrupt the status quo for collective good. A positive disruptor on a team has ambition, but this ambition is first for the mission, then the team, then lastly themselves. A positive disruptor always knows there is room for improvement and that the unit should constantly evaluate themselves to ensure they are on the cutting edge.

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Everybody has a burning passion to change something, but that thing may not be aligned to the efforts of our organization, and that is okay. The people who rallied behind me were all people who did believe that there was a chance to make significant change and took very little convincing on my part to pursue the vision. My advice is this: Throw out an initial rallying cry and see who assembles. Run your ideas through your newfound team, and the second everybody starts to become very comfortable with the idea, then make it uncomfortable. Bring in outside perspective, find people who disagree and interview them. Hunt for holes in your plan. Doing so will make you better; it also will create a "sniff test" to see who is on board and ready for rough seas.

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Others have said that the most unique leadership trait about you is that you are willing to be vulnerable. Meaning that you are willing to go into a room composed entirely of Service members who outrank you (and likely disagree with you) and state your stance with both humility and conviction, knowing that the probable outcome is that you will get told no. What makes you willing to be so vulnerable?

Well, vulnerability is a part of my persona. When I say *vulnerability*, I mean "interpersonal vulnerability." This type of vulnerability is not looking vulnerable, timid, or meek, but rather being vulnerable by putting it all out there. It is also not about pretending to have confidence. It is about exposing yourself to potential failure and not playing it safe. Many organizations will have people who "claim" to have all the answers but are not vulnerable enough to go in front of the decision makers and lay it all on the line. It is like jumping out of an airplane; on some level, you must be okay that the

jump could go poorly. That is why vulnerability is critical for leaders to create organizational change.

I enjoy letting people know where I'm coming from, why I think the way that I do, and my weak points. There have been times in which this has created friction, but, for the most part, people have respected me for this trait. I often provide a very different perspective from the norm, and I have learned over the years that I must provide backup and references so that the receiver will be open minded. I treat their potential skepticism as an opportunity to showcase my credibility. I am numb in certain social settings to those with bad attitudes, meaning that I don't take their dislike for my ideas personally.

Over the course of several months, which involved numerous meetings with your peers across the globe and hundreds of man hours conducting mission analysis, you were able to present your recommendations up the chain of command. While the chain of command listened to your presentation, they ultimately did not implement all of your recommendations. Any regrets on trying to implement change? Would you approach the process differently if you could?

To be clear, 60 to 70 percent of my ideas received a thumbs up. I really respect the way the command handled it. What did bother me was the way it was packaged and sent to the higher level of command and briefed on my behalf—in some cases, such an approach can result in a form of corporate sabotage. However, there are zero regrets on my part regarding these efforts; in fact, I am pleased with the whole experience.

As mentioned, I gained a lot of experience in planning, COA development, wargaming, and briefing to Marine Raiders of much higher rank and billet (position) than me. As a business owner who regularly interfaces with people in the financial and medical industry, those meetings, all the mission analysis, and briefs to headquarters molded me into the founder and chief executive officer whom I am today. Am I a better Raider because of all of this? YES.

What advice would you give someone who tried to create change, but their ideas were not implemented?

Do your best to not to take it personally. At the time, "taking it personally" was a hurdle that had to be worked through, because we had poured so much into the project, and yet it did not come to full fruition. We had hoped for certain initiatives to take off with full momentum, and it did not happen. However, while leaders should listen to their subordinates, subordinates must support lawful decisions that are not their own. This response of support calls upon both humility and maturity.



Shown above is NP following the conclusion of desert training with his team.

Also, do your best to find criticism. While the idea may seem odd, the sooner that you can learn to seek and understand opposition, the better that your pitch and the product will become, whatever it is. If you can seek and take criticism well, you will have a competitive advantage over many individuals.

Any final thoughts on leadership, creating opportunities to be a catalyst, or working toward needed changes (even if the goal of change does not manifest as desired)?

Harness the energy and remember that endurance is the most important quality for leadership. Change will come, but it rarely happens overnight—keep your head on a swivel and your hands up, ready to defend or to strike.