While what follows applies during combat as well, most of it covers garrison and field responsibilities of most chiefs of staff in most divisions in other parts of the world.

Assume you have been informed by the division commander that he has selected you to be the next division chief of staff. The odds are that somewhere along the line you have been a member of a battalion, brigade and/or division staff and already have some idea of what a staff does for a living and how they do it. But as you are about to discover, there are no Command and General Staff College-approved solutions or Training and Doctrine Command manuals describing the tactics and techniques of how to be a good division chief of staff. So, with the exception of maybe a brief conversation with your boss and, if you’re lucky, perhaps a hurried discussion with your predecessor, you are on your own. Nevertheless, everyone directly or indirectly involved with division staff actions and recommendations or command decision making instantly assumes you have already figured out how to deal productively, successfully and simultaneously with an impressive number of different people. The short list includes:

- Your immediate boss, the division commander, who typically will be “out in the field” or “checking training” and seldom anywhere near the headquarters when you need immediate guidance or a five-minutes-ago decision on some critically complex subject dealing directly with thousands of troops or millions of dollars.
- Assistant division commanders keenly interested in helping make your job more challenging, many of whom have been chiefs of staff themselves and hence are often even more keenly interested in passing on an infinite number of friendly tips on how you and the staff could be doing a better job.
- General’s aides who are likely still learning that it would be to everyone’s benefit if they kept you informed about whatever it was their respective bosses discovered while they were wandering about exploring division activities that day.
- The division command sergeant major who probably knows more about what’s going on in the division than the entire staff combined, and whom you should immediately make one of your closest advisers.
- An often happily obstreperous general and special staff made up of more than a dozen adroit folks blessed with inordinate energy and unlimited initiative, people who seem always to be lined up outside your door waiting for the chance to announce, “Chief, do you remember telling us that bad news doesn’t get
better with age. Well, I think you need to know about such and such.”

- Independent and usually strong-willed headquarters commandants pleading for help while doing their best to conduct essential readiness training for an equally independent and strong-willed staff that, for example, mysteriously vanishes when he wants them to run through the gas chamber on Saturday mornings.

- Brigade commanders who are not the least bit hesitant—indeed, are kind of eager—in advising you of better ways for division and your staff to support, defend, champion, aid, abet and cooperate with their respective combat teams.

- Your counterparts at higher headquarters whose bosses will call your boss with good news, but who pass bad news directly to you.

With these considerations and cautions in mind, you need to know that in addition to fundamental troop leadership principles such as three-way loyalty, integrity and taking care of the troops that do not change when dealing with or within a staff, there are 10 basic rules for being an effective chief of staff. As you gain more experience, you will most likely want to expand this list, but for starters these 10 will get you through the first several weeks with minimum damage to your ordinarily cheerful disposition.

1. Always act as if you have some idea of what the staff is telling you, even if you don’t have a clue. If you are not able to manage “the look,” you can always fall back on the most frequent responses of every veteran chief, which are: “Run that by me again” or “please explain that to me in simple English.” These usually catch the staff off-guard, thus causing them to return to the drawing board, which then gives you time to ask the secretary of the general staff, “What the heck was that all about?”

2. One of the best ways to keep the staff on their toes is always to ask at least one learned question of at least one staff officer each time the staff meets. The more complicated the question, the better; however, be sure to spread it around so that none of the staff can guess who is going to be asked the next learned question. And while very little will phase a seasoned staff, always ask questions that leave them shaking their heads in wonder and amazement.

3. During those frequent occasions when, because of time or circumstances, you have independently made decisions affecting the entire division (particularly when such decisions are contrary to policies of higher headquarters), at the first convenient time when the commanding general is in a mellow mood advise him of your wisdom and decisiveness so he isn’t too surprised when the Department of the Army inspector general walks into his office unannounced.

4. Part of a chief’s job description is that he reads almost constantly. Unfortunately, this is not good for your eyes and chiefs of staff often develop a squint, which even more unfortunately can be unintentionally intimi-
dating. Even if you feel like the end of the world is near, compensate by smiling whenever a staff officer enters or leaves your office or you open and close a meeting.

5. At least daily, and preferably at the end of the day, interrogate the aides to find out what mischief the division and assistant division commanders have stirred up in the past 24 hours. This signals the aides that their contributions are important; provides you, as the chief, an opportunity to dazzle unsuspecting staff officers with your inside knowledge, resourcefulness and foresight; and gives the staff a heads-up to potential follow-on actions they may have to take in the immediate future (or should already have been working on).

6. As often as possible, but at least weekly, walk through the offices of each staff section during duty hours. This shows the staff you are interested in them and what they are doing, and gives you the opportunity to see for yourself behind-the-scenes working conditions and the attitude and morale of the staff. By talking with junior staff members, you gain not only a better feel for what’s going on below the decks but many times astute advice on better ways to make the staff more effective. In addition, also walk through staff sections after duty hours because this is one of the best ways to sense if the staff is working late—because you failed to provide the right resources or proper guidance in a timely way. It also allows you to judge for yourself if assigned actions, staffing and suspense dates are proportionately equitable, doable, reasonable and fair, and it identifies the few workaholics in every staff who are working overtime on routine matters simply for the sake of work and need your assurance that the Army expects them to also enjoy their families.

7. During any session with either the entire staff or an individual staff member, about every five or 10 minutes look as if your mind is deeply immersed in thoughtful consideration. It is not necessary to frown, but it helps. Even if you have to fake it, though, it’s important that your facial expressions reflect astute intelligence, wisdom and multiple experiences accumulated over your many years of service. Your demeanor and body language should also reflect careful weighing of all pros and cons and an obvious ability to remain far ahead of the staff, even if you are, as usual, a day and a half behind.

8. Whether it’s a critical action, a standard tasking order or a simple request for information, a good chief of staff must be interested not only in efficiency, but also be considerate and respectful of the staff. Efficiency, consideration and respect can be achieved only if you habitually “move the paper.” Whether actual paper, handwritten notes, standard forms, letters, directives, e-mail, telephone, wireless devices or other communication means, it is imperative that you approve, disapprove, comment on, forward or return staff actions the same day you get them. Nothing will frustrate or demoralize a staff quicker than to submit a completed action which they worked hard to finish by a specified date, only to find that this same action sat unattended in the chief’s in-box. Regardless of suspense dates, subjects or importance, output should equal input. From Day 1, make it a habit to clear out all in-boxes every night.

9. Insist that on average at least once every other week each general and special staff officer visit the commanders and their counterpart staff officers of each major command. This reinforces the idea that the staff genuinely supports subordinate commanders and units, neutralizes potential we-they perceptions and provides the staff firsthand appreciation for the work, problems and accomplishments of the division’s subordinate units, which in turn help them do their jobs better. And incidentally, for these same reasons get yourself out of the office, too. A word of caution, though: Sometimes in their eagerness to follow a chief’s get-out-and-visit directives, staff officers have been known to charge from the headquarters with little if any cross-coordination, which on more than one occasion has resulted in the entire staff showing up at the same office of the same commander on the same day at the same time—which did not make these same commanders very happy.

10. A new chief of staff inherits a staff accustomed to the personality and methods of the previous chief of staff. You may not agree with the way your predecessor operated, which is OK, but respect the staff’s learning curve and make any changes gradually. In the long run you may also begin to think of it as your staff. While that’s partially understandable, be aware of and avoid this at all costs. As the division’s chief of staff you are the major coordinator, counselor and overall conductor, but it is never your staff. Rather, it is called the general staff for a reason, and as such it works on behalf of the entire division. Remind yourself, and emphasize to every member of the general and special staff and all subordinate commanders that the division staff is our staff—and then make sure it functions that way.

It’s a given that you will have additional ideas to make your job and the staff’s job easier and more productive, but these 10 basic rules will give you a running start as a new division chief of staff. A final point—there is also an unwritten rule 11: If you don’t enjoy your job, neither will the staff; if you do enjoy it, the staff will, too.

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