



Taking the Baton

Preparing for Leadership Transitions in the Army

By MG Ryan Janovic and MG Mark Miles

Command is a pivotal experience and a career-defining opportunity. The scope of responsibility and depth of impact can be immense. For many, command introduces a level of complexity, ambiguity, and expectation that outstrips current experience. Too often, though, the preparation for a command transition is rushed, formulaic, or routine. We should treat command transitions with the same level of practiced precision with which Olympic runners rehearse the baton handoff in the 4 x 100 relay. Baton passes—in races or in command—can dictate the outcome for an entire team. In 2025, the Juliet Funt Group published “Passing the Baton: Bringing Intentionality to Military Command Transitions” to analyze such transitions in detail—identifying common pitfalls and opportunities for improvement. The Army Cyber Center of Excellence (CCOE) is building on that work and experimenting with two new approaches to preparing signal and cyber officers for key leadership positions.

We believe that the command-preparation phase mirrors the training regimen of a relay runner. It requires dedicated time for study, preparation, reconnaissance, and relationship building. This isn’t simply about reviewing briefs and reading reports. It’s about understanding a unit’s

culture, grasping the nuances of its operations, building rapport with key personnel who affect the unit, and preparing oneself physically and mentally. To be successful, leaders bound for command must understand their own strengths and weaknesses, identify areas needing improvement, and seek mentorship. This preparation isn’t a passive receipt of information; it’s an active process of inquiry, analysis, and synthesis. It is about practice. Our first experiment helps expand an officer’s practice window from one week of PowerPoint toward 12 months of guided, resourced, and personalized learning.

No matter how skilled and swift two runners may be, the consequences of a flawed baton pass can be severe. A poorly executed command handoff can result in wasted time, knowledge gaps, and a failure to understand operational context that could take a new commander months to attain. Meanwhile, the unit can fall behind and lose tempo with mission mastery. The second experiment at the CCOE requires a detailed, two-week transition plan for all colonels; a general officer (GO) drafts, resources, and manages the plan as an operation linked to organizational success. This experiment certainly has roots in the “right seat/left seat rides” of deployment reliefs in

Brig. Gen. Mark Miles and Maj. Gen. Ryan Janovic are the Deputy Commanding General and Commanding General of the U.S. Army’s Cyber Center of Excellence. The CCoE held a ceremony Sept. 6, 2024, to welcome Brig. Gen. Miles as the first active-duty Deputy Commanding General. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. 1st Class Richard Dewitt)

place, and anecdotal evidence suggests it is an effective means to validate a successful handoff of command.

Experiment #1—Thinking Differently About Preparing for Command

For decades, the Army has appropriately focused resources on preparing officers of each grade for command. In fact, the Combined Arms Center operates the School for Command Preparation, where every field-grade and general-officer commander has gained preparatory knowledge and wisdom. Over time, however, branch- or skill-specific additional courses became routine, and we scheduled our way into weeks of temporary duty that gave the appearance of true preparation. At the Cyber Center of Excellence, we mastered the checklist for executing a week-long, in-person course of PowerPoint, guest speakers, morale events, and updates on what is happening in the branch. We filled nine hours each day, Monday through Friday—all very well-intended and appropriate at the time. However, with the Army's recent call to streamline branch-specific pre-command courses, we see an opportunity to build a model for command preparation that is longer, tailored, and curated by a general officer.

With the publication of each fiscal year's Centrally Selected List (CSL), we know the officers who are slated for command and key billets 12-18 months in advance. Each is a high-performing officer with a history of success in challenging jobs; however, we have little guarantee that previous experience is sufficient to prepare each officer for expectations of field-grade command or complex staff positions on the centrally selected list. Likewise, there is little proof that a week of mandatory training, delivered uniformly to each officer without consideration for that person's experiential gaps, has led to success in command. The CCOE is completely replacing the former static process. We are taking advantage of the time available, personalizing the practice sessions, employing general officers as mentors, and measuring the outcomes along the way. We began in August.

How does it work? Shortly after reviewing the CSL, the deputy commanding general (DCG) delivers (along with a note of congratulations) a survey to each signal or cyber selectee. We ask five broad questions that are solely designed to shape the next step. The commanding general (CG) or DCG spends an hour reviewing the survey with each officer (normally on a Teams video call). Two things come out of this session. First, we have a broad outline of the training plan for the next year, including recommended readings, personnel to meet, and which briefings, training-center rotations, and seminars to attend. Second, we ensure a GO mentor is paired with the officer. We seek a GO with experience in the same unit to which the officer is headed. This informal training schedule becomes a personalized, curated approach to helping the officer add some rigor to self-learning. It has the benefit of having a GO as an "assistant coach"—checking in on the training plan, correcting what isn't working, recognizing emergent

opportunities that could benefit the officer, and ensuring that we are building confidence in our future commanders. When done well, we believe that we will help inbounds attain a focused understanding of:

- The unit's mission and operational environment
- Strategic and operational context of the unit today
- Systems, processes, organizations, and individuals critical to success of the unit
- Current priorities of the Army and how the unit supports lethality
- Specific technologies' effects on modernization and how they affect the unit

Does it work? We don't know yet, as we are only three months into the first cohort of officers. However, we do have early feedback that the model reinforces the self-directed learning tendency of many signal and cyber officers. Lastly, the flexible, year-long model increases opportunities that are lost in the fallacy that five days at Fort Gordon fully prepares 14 different officers for 14 different experiences. The CCOE CG or DCG will conduct one-on-one after-action reviews with each officer approximately 45 days prior to their command (before they begin PCS preparation, leave, and report into the new unit). In the spring of 2026, we will have more results from the experiment to help us focus our efforts.

Experiment #2—Plan and Resource the Baton Transition

Our second experiment focuses on the arrival, indoctrination, and transition plan for any new colonel reporting to our organization. We will plan the baton passage between two talented leaders, ensuring GO oversight and directly resourcing the effort. While the pre-command work in Experiment #1 is designed to best prepare the officer by addressing context, processes, and experience gaps, Experiment #2 recognizes that no amount of preparation outside the unit in contact can replace focused education while in contact—a lesson we draw from well-executed right-seat/left-seat rides during deployments.

It begins with a rule: Neither the inbound nor the outbound colonel is allowed to decide the timing of a transition. Allowing officers to dictate the timeline often leads to delays and compromises the time needed for a thorough handoff. Seemingly prohibitive on the surface, this rule places responsibility on the Chief-of-Staff (CoS), the staff, the garrison commander, and others to participate in the resourcing of a transition. The second rule adds refinement: The two weeks of deliberate transition will not include household goods delivery, permissive TDY, leave, or in and out processing. Said another way, we will ensure that officers have time to care for themselves and their families but not at the expense of the baton pass that is central to mission outcomes. With only those two rules, the CCOE Commander or Deputy Commander can sketch, refine, and approve a transition plan that starts at "inbound sign in" and ends with "outbound sign out."

Our discrete focus in Experiment #2 is the core two weeks of the transition plan—what the inbound and

outbound leaders must do together (and separately) to ensure the organization doesn't lose tempo or sacrifice outcomes in the coming months. We believe that when done well, the tempo is unaffected. However, when it is not done well, the loss of progress can reverberate for months. The two-week plan always begins with an in-brief to the DCG and ends with a certifying out-brief to the CG. While the contents vary in detail by position, we broadly aim to ensure the two weeks are saturated with:

- Understanding the battle rhythm and the contents within
- Meeting stakeholders—on our installation and at Higher Headquarters (HHQ), Pentagon, etc.
- Focused discussions on risk, legal casework, and authorities
- Targets in the next 30 days—what will hit you first

We direct many of the specific events that attain those outcomes. For example, the CG's intent for transition might include the names of senior officers the inbound and outbound will meet with in a joint office call—the CG resources the meeting by gaining GO/Senior Executive Service (SES) support for the office call. Similarly, the CG may direct the inbound to attend a battle rhythm event that they might not normally participate in but one that offers tremendous context during the transition.

What doesn't happen? By setting two guiding rules and ensuring GO oversight of baton-passage planning, we avoid the "baton-exchange zone"—the two weeks before change of command—from getting clouded by the misbelief that "section in-briefs" are sufficient or from getting diluted by administrative actions.

Does it work? We are absolute in saying it works in theory, but we must continue to apply the experiment in practice. We don't control all the variables of orders, household goods, and specific personal needs; however, early evidence suggests that broadcasting our intent allows the CoS, the G1, the garrison commander, and the incumbent (those often first in contact with an inbound colonel) to help convey the requirements of baton passage and help us prevent collapsing the exchange zone due to a failure to plan.

Our Army has a formal program of instruction for preparing all future commanders; we believe in the outcomes of Fort Leavenworth and the in-person model of core warfighting and leadership training. The CCOE is committed to adding to those outcomes by proving two experiments. Our first experiment—changing the way we approach branch-specific pre-command training—will benefit the entire Army as we enrich the readiness of the men and women of our signal and cyber branches. We will use the time between "list release" and "reporting to next duty station" for GO-guided, tailored learning that increases readiness and individual confidence. Our second experiment is local, yet important to prove the power of a managed, focused, and deliberate transition between two colonels. We believe this baton passage is important to sustain unit momentum and therefore must be guided and supported by the unit. We will provide the Army with results and feedback in the spring of 2026.

Major General Ryan M. Janovic is the 42nd Commanding General, U.S. Army Cyber Center of Excellence and Fort Gordon. A native of Akron, Ohio, Ryan graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1993 and commissioned into the Military Intelligence Corps. He served with Multi-National Forces Iraq, 1st Infantry Division in eastern Afghanistan, Military Intelligence in Korea, later with Commander United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea, and various posts throughout the U.S., including a tour as a White House Fellow. In 2019, Ryan joined the cyber ranks as the deputy commander of Joint Force Headquarters, Cyber (Army), leading the organization toward unit citations earned in support of U.S. Central Command. Ryan is married to the former Shannon Lea Howard of Greenville, North Carolina. Proud parents of an 11th grade scholar-athlete, Shannon and Ryan are happy to have been part of the local Augusta, Georgia, community for over five years.

Major General Mark D. Miles is currently the Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Cyber Center of Excellence and Fort Gordon, Georgia. He received his commission in 1995 after graduating from the United States Military Academy at West Point. He was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) where he completed three deployments to Afghanistan. He then commanded the 307th Expeditionary Signal Battalion and the 516th Signal Brigade. His other billets included Director of Operations/J3 at Joint Force Headquarters, DoD Information Networks, and command of 7th Signal Command (Theater). He most recently served as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command J6. MG Miles' military education includes the National War College and the Command and General Staff College. His civilian education includes a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from West Point, a Master of Science in Computer Engineering from Carnegie Mellon University, and Master of Science in Strategic Studies from National Defense University.