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How to Write Your Own User Manual

by Jim Perkins

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One of the constants of military life is the cyclic change of scenery and organizations. While this iterative churning serves many purposes, it has a clear drawback in that with each new assignment, leaders and subordinates must learn to work with each other. What should be a simple task, managing group dynamics distracts from more pressing issues at hand and is often in conflict with other priorities.

Perhaps it is precisely because of these other demands that what I'm about to propose is not widely used in most organizations. What if it were possible to bridge that psychological gap more quickly and reduce the friction between leaders and their teams? Can we accelerate Tuckman's *Form-Storm-Norm-Perform* cycle of organizational development? We can.



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U.S. Army Second Lt. Mark Lucas, a platoon leader with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team, briefs his soldiers before a logistics resupply mission July 8, 2012, at Forward Operating Base Arian, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod, Task Force 1-82 PAO.

In January 2003, The Wall Street Journal published a column by Joann S. Lublin in which she depicts a hospital executive's search for a new vice president. In the process, **he produced a 1-page document that included a self-assessment and tips from his peers that he thought might aid any new VP who came to work for him.** The process of accumulating feedback and circulating drafts led the executive to gain an even deeper understanding of his own strengths and weaknesses.

The current [Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback](#) is a self-guided system for development. [Debate continues](#) within the military about the merit and efficacy of 360-assessments, even as leaders in business, government, healthcare, and non-profit sectors all espouse the value of a self-aware leader. In a world of endless mandatory surveys and training, **demonstrating a genuine personal interest in self-development will show others that you actually value their input.**

A Guide to Me

As a captain who recently left command, I am keenly aware of how valuable this tool would have been to me, my First Sergeant, my platoon leaders, my battalion commander, and even (dare I say it) my brigade commander. We weren't perfect, and none of us knew how our subordinates perceived us, but no one else was more suited to discover these personal insights. A self-oriented user's manual is a roadmap for our subordinates as we form new relationships with them.

I wrote mine recently and wish that I'd started writing it years ago – I would have been a far better commander.

The first challenge is to simply **define your leadership style.** Tell the reader what you think your strengths and weaknesses are. Putting this into words is not easy. It takes self-awareness to identify your leadership style and it requires trust to honestly admit what holds you back. Offering this trust and transparency are a vital first step towards effective mission command and two-way communication.

The second task is to **define how you prefer other people to interact with you.** This challenge is different because you have to decide what is important and what isn't. How do you define a poor performing subordinate? At this point, even a rough draft is useful to begin soliciting feedback. My first choice for input was my fiancée. She knows me better than anyone else and her input helped me to develop my ideas more honestly and objectively. This gave me a solid version to share with my former platoon leaders and peers to solicit their input.

A Step Worth Taking

It seems like a no-brainer to produce a tool like this for your team, but most of us never go there. We give initial counseling with long, awkward discussions about roles and responsibilities and maybe if we find the time or the words, we get to this. Yet without a doubt, **clearly defining your own leadership style will reduce the risk of failure and improve efficiency.** (I've had leaders who would have achieved better results out of me if they'd informed me of what manner of performance most resonated with their leadership style.)

Think how enabled your team would be if you gave them the answers to questions like these:

What frustrates me?

How do I handle conflict?

What type of personality do I exhibit and what kind of teammate personalities do I resonate with?

How do I recharge throughout the day so that I can handle the pace of operations?



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What personal life events have created emotional touchpoints to be avoided or regarded?

How do I expect others to present important information? Do I prefer elaborate explanations or the bottom line up front?

How long does it take for me to develop trust with the people I work with?

What balance of work and life do I expect my people to achieve?

I submit that the benefits of writing your own user guide far outweigh the time and uncomfortable honesty it will demand. Do it once and, like a resume, you need only update it when you change jobs. It will serve as a living document that both guides and follows your interactions as a leader. For leaders who take pride in learning and improving, such a document would be a great starting point.

Below is my own User Manual, which I offer as an example to help you create your own.

User Manual For Captain Jim Perkins

Myers-Briggs: ESTJ

Give & Take: 53% Matcher, 40% Giver

For Best Results:

I care passionately about leader development. I truly believe that we are in the business of creating leaders. Find out what kind of leader you are and find out how you can get better. I will ask you often to tell me what your strengths and weaknesses are and even more often I will ask you about mine.

One of my core values is fairness. I work hard and I expect others to do the same. I don't want to be selfish, but I don't enjoy feeling like my selflessness is taken for granted either. I will mirror what I feel you are giving me.

I constantly want to improve everything: myself, you, our team, and our systems. I give candid feedback often and I am comfortable receiving it. I welcome open debate with anyone. Forget about rank, but keep it respectful. The status quo can always be improved, so let's figure out how we can do something better. Start with "why", take a systematic approach, and design systems based around goals, not requirements.

I prefer to encourage creativity rather than tell someone how I want them to do something. While this system works well for me, some people prefer for me to be more directive. There is a time for innovation and there is a time to just get stuff done.

I am not very expressive of my mood. I separate my work and personal life and expect others to do the same. I am tolerant of exceptions to this, but I have a limit. I am well-organized and I think that presentation matters. I take a balanced approach to being detail oriented: Who is going to see this? I wear a clean uniform every day and keep the office organized. Take ownership of your area: get rid of stuff that is no longer needed and put stuff away.

I will not tolerate bureaucracy. I don't deal with it above me, and I certainly won't let someone on my team be a part of the problem. Imagine this office as a business and focus on providing excellent customer service and value to the customer (the soldier). Imagine being on the other side of the desk.

Troubleshooting (My Areas Of Weakness):

Tell me immediately if you feel that I am not asking for your suggestions. I appreciate when others are inclusive towards me, so I strive to collaborate and integrate divergent interests. I often defer to group judgment and democracy for decisions. I rarely ask to be included and in the past I have worked with people of

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similar styles and we make each other feel unwanted when we actually both just wanted the other to reach out.

Make sure that I end after-action reviews and performance reviews by reiterating what went well. I am very motivated and I have very high goals and expectations. I am brutally honest and sometimes it hurts. As a result, I forget to recognize or reward achievement because I focus too much on what we can do better. Past subordinates know that I care, but they would say that I need to be more expressive of appreciation. I simply cannot tell people how proud or thankful I am of them much.

Sometimes I forget what it was like to be in your shoes. As a commander, I didn't realize that my platoon leaders didn't understand property accountability like I did. If you don't understand something or you're frustrated with a problem, it may be easiest to ask me to show you exactly what I want. I won't always solve the problem for you, but I can always clarify.

I have low patience for bad performance and low effort. I understand that mistakes are not the same as bad performance. If you feel like I'm getting into your area of responsibility, I probably am and it's because I don't feel confident that you've got it under control. I need you to show me your plan to fix the situation.

Jim Perkins is an Army officer who seeks tangible and practical ways to improve leader development in the military.

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[Marion Mouton](#) • 3 months ago

Thanks! I recently received feedback that encouraged me to share my processing style. This is a great tool that I can encourage my team to use utilizing the DiSC survey.



[MISSION: Capable.](#) • 1 year ago

I am about to change jobs myself and was relooking my leader philosophy which I have been tweaking every year since I took company command. I had never thought of the user manual for me, but like you said, I immediately began to see the value to those who work with me. Will cut down on the learning curve that comes with new coworkers. Smart concept that I will definitely be doing this weekend! Great stuff, Jim.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Military Leader is hosted by an Army Infantry officer with 16 years experience and four deployments to Iraq/Afghanistan. He has been a student of leadership for two decades and designed The Military Leader to help other leaders develop themselves and grow their organizations.

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