

## Tips for Communicating with Senior Leaders (O-6 and above): A Tongue-in-Cheek Guide to Success as an Action Officer Swimming with the Big Fish

**Your mileage may vary, but...** based upon the hard won experience of some Senior Leaders Emeritus it would behoove you to:

### 1) Understand how Senior Leaders look at the world you share with them

- a) Senior Leaders are busy managing multiple responsibilities and there is never enough time to give each of them the attention they deserve.
- b) Senior Leaders spend their days bouncing from meeting to meeting often with little time to prepare for those meetings. Even when this is not really true, they want everyone to believe that is the case so they don't lose face with their peers and their bosses don't give them even more to do.
- c) Senior Leaders see the headquarters world as a food chain (Figure 1):

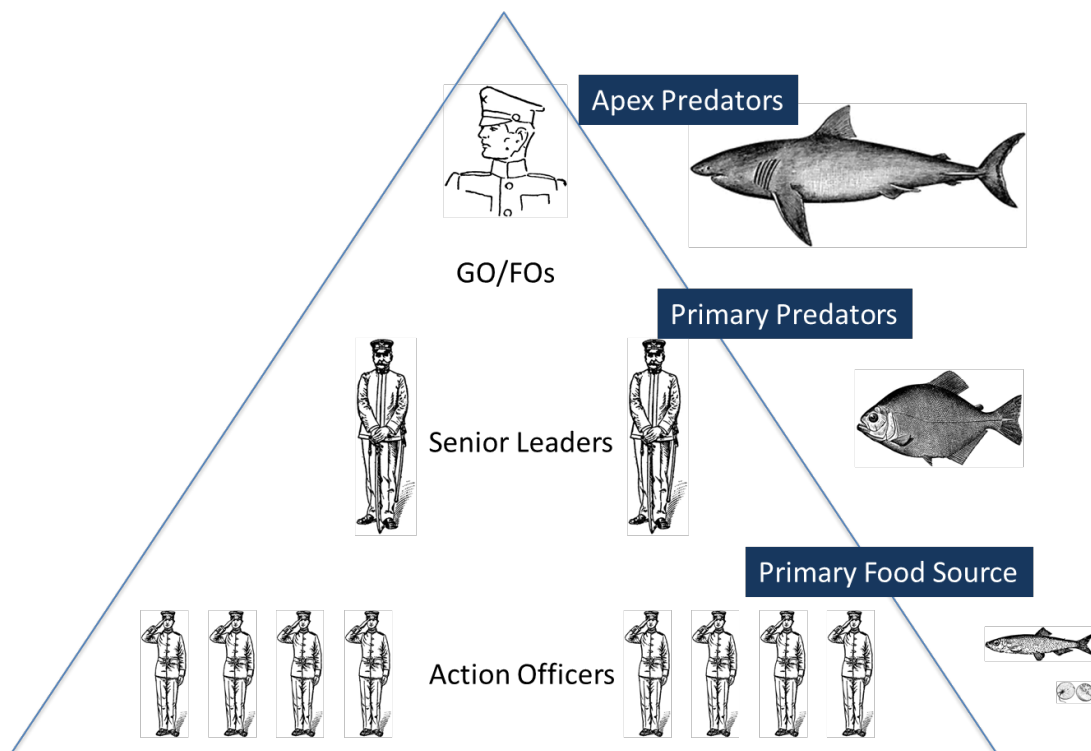


Figure 1 - The Headquarters Food Chain

- i) **General/Flag Officers and Senior Executive Service members (GO/FOs)** are the apex predators. They are the ones with the authority to make decisions of consequence and to establish the organization's position on any given issue. That doesn't imply that they are good at any of that; it is just their turn.
- ii) **Senior Leaders** play a key role supporting GO/FOs. As the "primary consumers" of staff work their role is to make sense of all the heat, light, and noise generated below and convey what is important to and from the GO/FOs. They see themselves as "interpreters" who translate action officer mumbo-jumbo into the Queen's English and vice versa. This truly is a critical

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- function that helps ensure organizations are better led and it can also prevent a lot of wasted staff energy.
- iii) **Action Officers** are the “primary producers.” Action officers collect and analyze information and submit recommendations to senior decision makers, that when approved become decisions. They work within individual stovepipes and the bureaucracy works hard to ensure those pipes are separate and distinct. These are your people and you are at the bottom of the food chain. Row well and live!
  - d) Senior Leaders have mixed view of Action Officers like you. At one level, they may remember what it was like to be a minion and perhaps feel some sense of sympathy for you. At another, they firmly believe that Action Officers are remarkably less capable and attentive to detail than they were just a few years ago. This attitude has developed over time and is loosely based on the quality of staff work the Senior Leader has personally observed.
  - e) Like it or not, Senior Leaders are not always well informed/prepared by subordinates when they roll into a meeting or chime in on something. When that is the case, both share the blame but the Senior Leader is more likely than not to blame his/her minions. Thus, Action Officers who can anticipate their boss’s information and preparation needs and prevail upon them to take the prep are especially valued and nothing breeds confidence in a minion better than repeated success.
  - f) Like GO/FOs, Senior Leaders leverage an intuitive understanding developed through extensive experience, even when it isn’t appropriate to the current topic. Put another way, they usually go with their gut and more often than not, that is the right thing to do. Remember this when presenting them with something new or a recommendation that is unconventional. You have a higher hill to climb.
  - g) Better Senior Leaders endeavor to manage up. GO/FOs don’t like surprises; they don’t like bad news; and they don’t like to look or feel uninformed or stupid. The Senior Leader looks after the care and feeding of his/her GO/FOs to ensure none of those things ever happen and thus, the Senior Leader can keep a faint hope alive that they too might become an Apex Predator. This requires a Senior Leader to try to look at things the way the GO/FO will so that they can anticipate and shape how he or she will respond/act on a given issue. This is a black art with many, many variables in play. Not all Senior Leaders can pull it off, but most at least try.

### **2) You should help Senior Leaders to help you.**

- a) Treat Senior Leaders like the decision-makers/shapers they are. As an Action Officer yourself, it should be a point of pride that you never make or allow your boss to do your job for you. It takes more than a few years and the special trust and confidence of the President of the United States to rise to the level of Senior Leader. For most, it is also a fleeting moment of glory and influence that will be hard to recapture later in life. You get there in part based upon your success as an Action Officer and most don’t want to play that role again. If your Senior Leader wants too, there is not much you can do but embrace the suck and hope he/she eventually relents under the crushing weight of their other responsibilities.
- b) Perhaps nothing is more important than showing Senior Leaders that you value their time and attention. (See 1 a above) Giving a Senior Leader a multi-tab spreadsheet, a 20-page paper or

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an e-mail with 14 levels of forwards and replies is generally a bad idea. Be concise and provide a Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) is all your communications with Senior Leaders. When you do you tell the Senior Leader that you respect his/her time, you recognize their place in the food chain, and you are confident enough in the quality of your own staff work that you don't need to preemptively explain it all in glorious detail.

- c) Always try to place information in context and in a form that resonates with your Senior Leader. There is nothing worse than having to play 20 questions – most begin “why” – with a minion. It can turn any short engagement into a never-ending slog as your Senior Leader is forced to demonstrate how your narrow-minded understanding and ham-fisted packaging is inadequate for the topic. Neither of you want to go through that, well, the Senior Leader may take secret pleasure in toying with you before the deathblow, but that isn't ALWAYS the case.
- d) Honor “process” where it exists or at least explain to your Senior Leader when, where and why you want to deviate. You will need to have very good reasons in the latter case. No matter how slow, nonsensical, and arcane the existing process may be, Senior Leaders will value it as part of the rules that give structure to staff interaction up and down the chain.
- e) Above all, get to know your Senior Leader and the GO/FOs he/she serves. Overtime you will come to understand their care and feeding requirements, how they think, their modes of expression, and their idiosyncrasies. That understanding will make you a more effective and happier Action Officer and it just might contribute something important to the defense of our nation.

Understanding how Senior Leaders see the world and how best to engage with them will help you “push the noodle” on your actions. It will provide grease to lubricate staffing inside and outside your headquarters. It will allow you to focus the formidable expertise and institutional power of Senior Leaders on substantive matters where it belongs.