

DISTRICT COMMANDER: LEADERSHIP, DUTIES & RESPONSIBILITIES



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.

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Introduction

Being a member of the VFW means being an agent of change.

But...

To be a leader within the VFW means connecting with those around you; inspiring them with a shared sense of mission; and through education and engagement, mobilizing them in order to accomplish a common goal. As Gen Stanley McChrystal put it,

“I was most reinforced by the understanding that where we were, the status quo was failing, and because it was failing I knew we had to change. But instead of trying to provide an exact path ahead, what I did was I tried to inform and engage the command by saying we have to move in this general direction- help me figure it out. As people did that, we refined the direction we were going, constantly shifting, and it made more people the agents of change.” (Leadership and Development Manual, vfw.org)

There is no one who can have a greater effect on the success or failure of the Posts in a District than the District Commander.

A successful District Commander is enthusiastic, dedicated, well-informed, available, and operates under the guise of 3 motivational elements [The puzzle of motivation, Dan Pink]:

1. **Purpose**: *“A yearning to do what you do in service of something larger than yourself.”* Motivate Posts and their Commanders by helping them define the VFW’s mission in their own words, and in doing so giving them ownership over their mission.
2. **Autonomy**: *“The urge to direct our own lives.”* Motivate Posts and their Commanders by giving them the ability and freedom to accomplish their mission in their own way.
3. **Mastery**: *“The desire to get better and better at something that matters.”* Motivate Posts and their Commanders by encouraging them to get better at accomplishing their mission with engaging and useful Schools of Instruction and educational training.

History of Districts

During the early years of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Posts were directly responsible to the National Organization. The first mention of a “Department” appears in the National Bylaws following the 1920 National Encampment (National Convention).

Districts appear to have come into existence in an evolutionary process, probably because of the need for an intermediate body between the Post and the Department. The first mention of “Districts” appears in the 1931 Bylaws which provided that District representatives on the Department Council of Administration be elected at the Department Encampment. Districts finally gained a section of their own in the Bylaws following the 1938 National Encampment but were denied any legislative or taxing power. It was only with the complete revision of Bylaws in 1948 that Districts gained full recognition under a special article devoted only to that subject. The Department holds Jurisdiction over Districts and determines its boundaries; however, the Commander-in-Chief issues District Charters.

Districts popularity probably stems from the flexibility of their boundaries to meet specific conditions, plus the fact that the National Bylaws grant them representation on the Department Council of Administration.

Districts have earned a very definite place in the VFW structure. Their size is such as to permit direct supervision of Posts within their jurisdiction. Not the least of their value is the pride, loyalty and comradeship developed among the Posts within their boundaries. Anyone who has attempted to re-district a Department knows of the fierce loyalties of a Post to its District.

Stay Educated and Informed

In order to be able to educate the Posts within the District you must utilize the resources available to stay educated and informed. The following list of VFW resources is not all encompassing, but it's a good start.

- Commander-In-Chief General Orders, National Headquarters Bulletin
- VFW.org and VFW Training and Support
 - The Training and Support section contains a wealth of knowledge and training materials to help you and assist you in Schools of Instruction.
- Department Training Programs
- Department Publications
- Department, District, and Post Bylaws
 - You should know the Department and District Bylaws, and be able to reference each Post's Bylaws within the District.
- VFW Podium Edition (Congressional Charter, Bylaws, Manual of Procedure, and Ritual)
 - The governing rules of our order. Advanced knowledge is imperative in answering questions and, when properly engaged, settling disputes.
- Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR)
 - Any procedural matter not covered in the National Bylaws and Manual of Procedure shall be governed by RONR. This manual will aid you in running meetings and, when properly engaged, settling disputes.
- VFW Magazine and National Publications (Checkpoint, Action Corps)

Duties and Obligations

The National Bylaws and Manual of Procedure address the duties and obligations of the District Commander, but in practice of course the District Commander has a great deal of responsibility beyond what is listed in the Manual of Procedure.

The District Commander who properly performs all the duties assigned to him/her is the busiest person in the VFW. In addition to representing their District on the Department Council of Administration, they are expected to maintain constant contact with their Posts, promote the programs of the VFW, help coordinate efforts of the Posts, create enthusiasm, mediate Post squabbles, instruct and advise Post Officers, assist struggling Posts, and organize new Posts. They must also plan and conduct District meetings, organize District functions, carry out membership drives, and keep the Department informed of what they are doing.

All this must be done without permanent office, without a paid staff and, in most cases, without an adequate allowance for expenses.

Only through proper planning and organization, through full use of your subordinate elected and appointed officers, and through a thorough understanding of the rules, regulations and programs of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, can you achieve the goals you have set for yourself as District Commander.

Appointments

Each of your appointments should be carefully considered and based on an individual's qualifications and ability to do the job. Of all of your appointments, the most important is your Adjutant, Chief of Staff, Inspector, and Service Officer.

Your wisdom in selecting an Adjutant can directly affect your accomplishments. His/Her value extends far beyond their ability to record the minutes of District meetings. The Adjutant can aid you with your correspondence, help you arrange your travels, advise you on procedures, plan and arrange your meetings and functions, and provide you with invaluable feedback when you need it.

A Chief of Staff should be a respected Past District or Department Officer with a sharp eye and keen judgement. You can't be everywhere at once, so it is important that you have an available Chief of Staff who can represent you and handle problems in a firm but professional manner.

Inspectors are more than data collectors, they are observers and educators. They are not enforcers, but informed guides who are good listeners and great teachers. An active and engaged Inspector can help you recognize Post issues and identify solutions.

District Service Officers should be well-versed in veteran's resources available in the District and impart that knowledge to Post Service Officers. The Department Service Officer is the only accredited Service Officer who has the training to help veterans file their claims; District and Post Service Officers exist to provide resource information and direct veterans with VA claims issues to the Department Service Officer.

You should appoint a Committee Chairman to match each Department Committee. Each District Chairman will be expected to work with the Department Chairman in the promotion and advancement of their particular activity. This should include, but is not necessarily limited to, "Buddy"® Poppy, Employment, Student Veteran Liaison, Community Activities, Legislative, Membership, National Home, and Youth Activities.

Preparing for District Meetings

Meetings serve a very useful purpose in creating enthusiasm, exchanging ideas, instructing Post Officers in their duties, and familiarizing members with the programs of the VFW.

To accomplish its purpose, a District meeting must be well planned and well carried out. The following reminders may help you in doing so:

1. Set the time, place and date at a previous District meeting. Posts wishing to host the meeting should be required to be present at the previous meeting to confirm their invitation and must be able to assure the members that proper facilities are available and that proper arrangements will be made.
2. If the Auxiliary meets at the same time, notify the President immediately of the decision.
3. Notify the Department Adjutant of your meeting schedule.
4. Notify, by letter, all District Officers and all Post Commanders of the time, place and date of the next meeting.
5. Make certain that District colors, the Bible, flag, gavel, etc. are present at the meeting.
6. Inform your officers of the part they are to play in the program.
7. Any invited guests should be informed of the time which will be allotted to them. Any guests who ask to appear must provide you in advance with an outline of their purpose in appearing.
8. If a Department representative is assigned, discuss their appearance in advance, and tell them what is expected.
9. Obtain all possible information concerning the progress of the Posts from Department Headquarters in advance.
10. Make up your meeting schedule in advance, making note of any particular business to come before the meeting. There is no reason why you cannot have someone primed to make necessary motions.
11. Be prepared to recognize the success of Posts or individuals performing to a higher standard.

Running a District Meeting

The order of business of a District Convention or meeting is outlined in Section 1003 of the National Manual of Procedure. This should be used as a guide but is flexible. You will probably have a Department representative who must be scheduled on the program and worked in somewhere. Don't make them wait until just before the closing ceremonies. You may want to take some action based upon their statements.

Open the meeting on time and keep it moving. If you open the meeting half an hour late, the members will be that much later at the next meeting. Don't let discussions get out of hand. If a matter is brought up which has no place in the meeting, cut off the discussion. Individual Post problems generally have no place on the District floor; these problems are best solved in a private setting rather than open to the opinions of the entire District.

Proper procedure in conducting a District meeting is essential. You are setting an example for the Posts and you cannot expect them to operate any better than you do yourself. Familiarize yourself with parliamentary procedure and with the Bylaws, Manual of Procedure and Ritual of the VFW. The appointment of a well-qualified member as a parliamentarian can help you, but remember that you are running the meeting.

Power & Authority

The National Bylaws charge the District Commander to “enforce strict observance of the laws and usages of this organization,” but this does not mean you should insert yourself into every Post squabble. It does mean you should watch, listen, and be aware of Post conflicts and ready to provide guidance when asked.

The District Commander should keep the Department Commander aware of matters concerning Posts within their jurisdiction. Quite often, the Department Commander will authorize the District Commander to take actions in his/her behalf. This should be done in writing by Special Order.

The District Commander cannot suspend the charter of a Post nor can he/she authorize the consolidation of a Post or the revocation of its charter. They can, however, make recommendations and should consult the Department Commander when such actions are contemplated.

Working with Posts

Personal contact with your Posts is crucial to keep Posts motivated, clear up misunderstandings, and build trust between Post and District Officers. As District Commander, you should know every Post Commander by their first name and they should be willing and able to come to you for feedback and advice.

A good way to establish contact is by organizing District events that encourage Posts to work with one another. Organizing District membership drives, stand downs, community service events, and fundraising efforts for District Programs are great ways to build camaraderie while displaying the VFW's value to the community.

There's no better way to show that you care like grabbing another District Officer and dropping in on a Post's event to lend a hand. Utilize District Officers, Chairmen, and Past Officers to help Posts with their own membership drives and programs as this encourages participation and helps create an active District.

Hold schools of instruction for Post Officers. If they don't come to the schools, bring the schools to them. Make sure the officers understand their duties and responsibilities. Once they know what they are

to do and how to do it they will become more active. Encourage the Posts and their officers through activity, engagement, and a shared sense of mission.

Post Problems

Even active good Posts develop problems. Sometimes these are such that the Post itself cannot solve them without outside help. Factional disagreements can get out of hand and involve even those members who take no side with either group. A little diplomacy can work wonders, if it is applied before the breach becomes too wide.

Post inspections are the best means of finding out what is going on in a Post. Copies of inspection reports are being provided to District. When you receive your copy of the reports, study them carefully, check any discrepancy, and follow them up to be sure that corrective action has been taken where necessary.

“Post Inspections are on-site interviews between the Inspector and Post leadership where the Inspector acts as an advisor to ensure the Post is operating pursuant to the provisions of the VFW Bylaws and that the Post operates for the purposes defined in our congressional charter. By collecting data, assessing operations, and lending best practices, the Inspector acts as a diligent instructor who imparts knowledge and guidance of Post operations. After inspection, the Inspector brings their findings and recommendations to their Leadership’s attention in order to create a standard for the Post and to ensure a strong foundation for the future.” (Inspector Phase I Trainer Guide, vfw.org)

Such things as illegal operations of Clubs, issuance of social cards to non-members, gambling in Post Clubrooms, etc., are not to be tolerated. Report illegal activities when seen before they get out of hand.

After addressing any issue, it is important to submit a detailed report to your leadership for review. Make sure you follow-up with Post to ensure deficiencies have been addressed in a timely manner.

Post Development

You are in the best position of anyone to know where a new Post can be put in. Keep the Department informed of your intentions and your progress. Contact the Department or National Headquarters for materials.

Don’t hesitate to organize a new Post just because a Post in a neighboring area objects. The extra interest engendered by a new Post will help them, not hurt them.

The institution of a new Post should be as big an event in the District as a new baby in your own family. They Commanders of other Posts should be invited to bring a delegation to the institution. In some Districts, it is customary for each existing Post to present the new Post with a cash donation at the institution. What better way to welcome the new Post into the family?

Don't let a new Post die on the vine. Have someone at each meeting for at least the first six months. Encourage the Post to take an active part in District affairs and make it feel that it belongs. Support this effort even after you leave office and encourage other officers and Past Officers to do the same.

Department Council of Administration

The District Commander serves in a dual capacity. In addition to their other responsibilities, they serve as a member of the Department Council of Administration and, as such, is a high ranking officer of the Department. When they appear at a Post meeting they represent the Department as well as the District. They are expected to uphold the actions of the Department and promote its programs.

The Department Council of Administration is in charge of the working interests of the Department between Conventions. It sets the budget, fixes salaries of the Department employees, audits accounts and disposes of the property of defunct Posts. As a member of the Council, you have a responsibility to the entire Department, not just the District. It is extremely important, therefore, that you be full acquainted with all the workings of the Department – particularly its financial structure.

VFW Training & Support (vfw.org)

The Veterans of Foreign Wars prides itself on the many volunteers who strive to further the purpose of our organization: our success as an organization depends on members like you. It is important that the member Posts of every District take steps to become educated leaders. The first step in developing leaders within our organization is ensuring that training is being received down to the lowest level. VFW Training & Support behind the member login at vfw.org was created to provide resources for training and education. It is up to you not only to access these resources, but utilize them to help create educated leaders within each Post in the District.

13 Steps to Success

For most of us, becoming District Commander took years of preparation by moving up through the chairs of a Post and then the District while chairing certain Committees, but that doesn't mean once you assume District Commander you automatically know what to do.

As a good Commander you must:

1. Remember your role as a leader, mentor, educator, and promoter of the VFW's mission and its programs.

Remember that the future Department and National leaders are coming from your ranks. Conduct your affairs just as though you are educating and mentoring the next Commander-in-Chief.

2. Realize that each Post is different and will often have very different ways of accomplishing our mission; and your role in helping a Post is to provide it with the education and resources to solve its problems and realize its own success.
3. Stay educated and informed so you can educate the Posts within the District.
4. Appoint a Chairman for every VFW program based on their personality and their ability to do the job rather than because you like them.

Make sure each Chairman, like each Post, has the resources and motivation to be successful. A Chairman must know the program, be interested in it, promote it actively, and be able to sell it to others. If the Chairman isn't willing or isn't able to do the job, remove them and appoint a new one.

5. Use your District Officers and delegate responsibility. You can't do everything yourself, which is why it is important to ensure everyone on your team knows their role, is educated, and realizes they are vital to the team's success.
6. Keep in constant contact with each Posts through regular emails, bulletins, telephone calls, personal notes and visits.

Know every Post Commander by first name and familiarize yourself with their interests and backgrounds. Make certain that Posts conduct regular audits, hold regular meetings, conduct membership drives, order and distribute Buddy Poppies, and carry out the VFW's mission and its programs.

7. Visit each Post at least once. There is no substitute for personal contact. The District Commander should be the first person the Post Commander thinks of when help or advice is needed.

The best way to let a Post and its members know that the District cares about their success is by visiting them at a community service event or helping them with a Post function.

8. Ensure District meetings are well planned and well conducted.

A meeting must be interesting and educational or you won't have attendance at the next one. Here is where Post Officers get their direct information and their inspiration. In many cases, these will be the only higher level meetings some of the Post Officers and members will attend during the year. The impression they receive here will determine their attitude toward the entire organization.

9. Schedule and hold Schools of Instruction, whether they are in connection with a regular District meeting or standalone instruction in local areas within the District. If the Posts won't come to you, bring the Schools of Instruction to them. Send out notices well in advance and call the Post Commander ahead of time to remind him/her to be present.

The first step in developing leaders within our organization is ensuring that training is being received down to the lowest level. This means also providing specific training for program Chairmen, Trustees, and even for active leaders in the Post who may not hold an office.

10. Identify, instruct, and educate struggling Posts. Show a concern for their problems, assign a junior or respected past officer to help with their membership drives and program initiatives, suggest programs and methods of carrying them out, encourage other Posts to help their neighbors.

Identifying struggling Posts and knowing where each one struggles is important because they will need much of your attention. Personalized instruction that give guidance on a Post's weak areas are imperative to helping it correct its deficiencies.

11. Organize new Posts or help revitalize an older one with new members. Every District has some areas where the VFW is not represented. New Posts and new members bring new and innovative ways of thinking and energy to our organization.

New Posts increase the diversity of your network, foster new ideas, and can energize a District. New Posts can shift the paradigm and introduce a new model of doing things. New Posts can change the culture of your District.

12. Work with the Auxiliary. An active Auxiliary is great help for a Buddy Poppy drive, Community Activities, Voice of Democracy and many other programs. Treat them as partners – not subordinates.
13. Know your role as a member of the Department Council of Administration.

Among other duties, you are responsible for administering the affairs and transacting the business of the Department between Department Conventions. (Section 522, National Bylaws)

Here are some things you shouldn't do:

1. Don't knock the National Organization, Department, or Past District Officers. You can't keep respect for the District if you make the members feel that the rest of the VFW is bad.

The best way to discourage people within the organization is by telling them their leaders are no good and don't care about them. As District Commander, your main role is as motivator, educator, and mentor – inspire great leaders by being one.

2. Don't embarrass Post Officers. Respect them as you would want to be respected.

Great District Commanders are polite but firm: part of being a leader is having thick skin, patience, and understanding when dealing with difficult people. Be professional, be polite, have character, but speak up and be firm.

3. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know something.

It's okay to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you." In fact, people will respect you for it. The District Commander isn't expected to know everything, but they are expected to have the tools and knowledge to find the answer and the character to follow-up.

4. Don't get discouraged.

District Commander is one of the toughest positions in the VFW. The job requires a great amount of knowledge, but even a greater amount of patience and determination. If you get stuck, ask a former District Commander for assistance – you should be able to lean on past District leaders for help.

Conclusion

“Leaders are people who hold a position of power: those who lead inspire. We follow those who lead not because we have to, but because we want to.” – Simon Sinek

As stated in the introduction, leadership is primarily the ability to get people to work together to accomplish a common goal. A good leader must create enthusiasm, provide direction, and encourage initiative. He/She must be able to set goals, plan their accomplishments, and obtain the cooperation of others to achieve them.

Your role as a mentor, educator, and promoter of the VFW’s mission and its programs doesn’t begin and end with Posts. A successful District Commander embraces this role, but a successful District has a Commander who educates and inspires each District officer and Chairman to do the same.

As District Commander, you represent the VFW in the District. The entire organization is judged by your actions, your appearance, and your personality. Likewise, your own membership will be inspired or turned off by the image you convey. It is very important that your personal conduct be above reproach.

Realize that each Post is different, but also realize that each one of the District officers and Chairmen is different as well. You must also provide them with the education and resources to realize their own success. To do this, you must constantly keep yourself educated by utilizing the tools and resources available to you through vfw.org and the Department.

You will be able to better assist the Posts in your District if you make yourself available. Emails, bulletins, and telephone calls are great, but nothing beats personal visits. Before you or another District officer visits a Post, you should educate yourself on their successes and shortcomings; be prepared to congratulate their success and give constructive feedback to help them going forward.

The better you know your District the more likely you will be able to spot communities that are ripe for a new Post. New Posts increase the diversity of your network, foster new ideas, and can energize a District. Your role as their mentor shouldn’t end once your term of office is over.

Plan your travels. Whenever possible, let a Post know when you are coming. Make full use of your subordinate officers. Coordinate their travels with yours. It is inexcusable to have three District Officers at one Post and none at another.

Know your people. Take an interest in their activities. Give credit where it is due. If someone needs a reprimand, do it privately. Don’t embarrass anyone in public. You are working with volunteers. Even if you disagree with their actions or beliefs, give them credit for sincerity. You will get better results with persuasion rather than with coercion. Don’t win an argument at the expense of losing a volunteer.

Finally, your role as Council Member is vital in keeping the Department leadership honest and transparent. Do not take this role lightly; especially, when it comes to the Department’s finances.

Review

Utilize the reading and your experience to answer the following questions. Multiple choice questions have one correct answer.

1. What problems does our organization currently face and how are these problems alleviated by displaying you care about a Post's and its members' success?

2. You should appoint an Officer/Chairman because...
 - a. You cannot find anyone else to do the job.
 - b. They are motivated, informed, and engaged.
 - c. They are your good friend.
 - d. You promised them an appointment.
3. How do you handle difficult and disruptive people?
 - a. Yelling and screaming at them until they're quiet.
 - b. Threatening them, their position, or their Post.
 - c. Politely and professionally speaking to them in a firm manner.
 - d. Cursing them behind their backs with other people.
4. How do you motivate Post Officers and their members?
 - a. Make yourself available as a mentor and educator.
 - b. Be prepared to praise success and provide feedback.
 - c. Remind them of the purpose of our organization.
 - d. Give them the autonomy to accomplish their goals.
 - e. All the above.
5. What are your duties on the Department Council of Administration?
 - a. Approve an annual budget for the Department.
 - b. Assist in Department audits.
 - c. Transact business between Department Conventions.
 - d. All of the above.

6. The Department Council of Administration ensures the Department...
- a. Maintains its fiduciary responsibilities and remains transparent.
 - b. Approves Department Officer compensation.
 - c. Votes to fill elective Department Officer vacancies.
 - d. Makes disposition of all properties in accordance with Sections 210 and 410.
 - e. All of the above.

7. List three things you should do before visiting a Post.

- i. _____
- ii. _____
- iii. _____

8. What are some ways you can establish contact with Posts and encourage their involvement?

9. List three reminders to help you prepare for a District meeting.

- i. _____
- ii. _____
- iii. _____

10. In your own words, what is the District Commander's role?

Thank you for serving our country and thank you for continuing to serve your brothers and sisters through the VFW.