***Rules for Surviving [and Thriving] as a Staff Judge Advocate!***

They keep making us SJAs so we must be doing something right. Little Wing, big Wing, joint Wing, deployed, NAF, MAJCOM, Col Thompson, Col Catron, and Col deCamara (and our many SJA contributors) may not have found the magic bullet, the one “thing” that will allow you to survive and thrive as you start (or continue) your SJA assignment, but we mostly agree on the following Rules as a foundation of not just survival but success. A lot of trials and a lot of errors went into being in a position to distill the top 99 Rules; we’re happy to provide this list of Rules to you to help smooth your way into the premier assignment for a judge advocate. Good luck!

[NOTE: The Rules are not and cannot be ranked by importance, as that will be an individual-to-individual determination which no two SJAs will agree on; but we had to number them for reference somehow and thus that is all the numbers are for--reference, not relative importance.]

***Prepare***

**Rule #1: You are not prepared for this assignment if you are not prepared for this assignment.** Unlike other assignments where you can show up on Day One and with mentoring learn the job, being an SJA takes preparation. Good on you for recognizing that and joining us for the discussion of our Rules.

**Rule #2: Learn (re-learn) the profession.** Read AFI 51-201 and AFI 51-202 and other relevant authorities to remind yourself (or update yourself if you haven’t practiced in a particular area in a while) what the current rules are. Identify and understand all military-justice metrics and milestones. Understand how to read and use AMJAMS reports and identify which reports provide you with what information.

**Rule #3: Read and heed AFI 1-2 and the Exemplary Conduct Statute [10 U.S.C. §9233]. Those are your leadership marching orders.** Also AFI 1-1 while you are at it. These are the baseline of what the Air Force expects out of commanders and leaders … it is foundational. Hew closely to those ideals and you’ll be off on the right foot.

**Rule #4: Hey justice experts, your bosses’ first 10 questions to you will be about ethics, sorry.** Read the JER, scour FliteKM and Campus for primers; though SJAs are not Action Officers, this is an exception.

**Rule #5: Start a journal.** Preparation takes effort, so start taking notes. You can’t remember everything. Call the incumbent SJA and take notes. Call mentors and former SJAs and take notes. Think about your leadership philosophies and how you’ll present your leadership style to the office and take notes. Read three books on leadership and take notes. Get the hint?

**Rule #6: Review our *Rules for Surviving as a CGO Judge Advocate!***These are ~90 Rules that every CGO should be following to be professional officers … good for you to know them so that, well, you’re modeling them and you’re amplifying them and can continue to mentor your CGOs in those areas. If your CGOs follow the CGO Rules, your SJA life will be so much easier.

**Rule #7: Our Rules are great, but you’ll get lots of advice … seek it, take it, but be true to yourself and only adopt what works for you.** You’ll go to SJAC and hear from graduated SJAs as to their keys to success, you’ll be overwhelmed … there is no one key to success, it’s often trial and error … but a trusted mentor(s) before and during can be invaluable.

**Rule #8: Build a group of informal SJA advisors.** Who will you call/email/text/Slack/TikTok (?) when you need to bounce an idea off someone or vent about an internal office challenge? Senior JAGC mentors who have served as Wing SJAs? Your fellow Wing SJAs across the AF and within the same NAF and/or MAJCOM? The SJA and/or DSJA at your NAF? A non-JAGC colleague who has previous command experience? A non-AF friend/mentor who has management and/or leadership experience? Figure it out early as you’ll need to lean on them early. Also, if you know you’re expecting a visit from TJAG, HHQ, or having an Article 6 soon after your arrival, identify and call a Wing SJA who recently had that visit and ask for their recommendations on how to make sure your visit goes well.

**Rule #9: Send “your” DSJA and LOS a greeting email telling them you look forward to working with them as soon as you know who they are.** Obvious, but never too early to start building your team’s relationships and good to start it off with enthusiasm. If they are already in place, don’t task them with prep stuff until two weeks before you arrive (see **Rule #18**, arrival **“Smart Book”**).

**Rule #10: Don’t call or email the current Wing Commander and introduce yourself.** She doesn’t know who you are … and right now she doesn’t care, she’s busy.

**Rule #11: Get your Wing’s most recent Article 6 Inspection Report, know the next Inspection date, track down the Wing mission brief, and get yourself some AMJAMS permissions for your new base.** If you are going to hit the ground running (which we encourage), you need to know the path you’re running down and this information can help paint that site picture--whether you are taking over a winner or a lemon or somewhere in between.

**Rule #12: You are going to be a leader on Day One … prepare a written leadership philosophy to hand out so your people know what you value and how you address challenges.** You’re going to be a leader, right? Not just a manager. You should have a sense by now what kind of leader you’re going to be, write it down (there are plenty of JAG-specific examples to get you started). Remember to be true to yourself, don’t just copy a list of characteristics.

**Rule #13:** **… Also have an Expectations Brief, which is different than a leadership philosophy or an Introduction Brief!** This shouldset expectations as to work, culture, accountability, climate of inclusion and what is important to you professionally and personally. It immediately lets your team know what you expect of your folks, but more importantly what they can expect of you.

**Rule #14: Spend some time preparing a template ACA/Feedback form (and jumping ahead schedule Initial Feedbacks right away once you arrive).** This exercise can help you flesh out your leadership philosophy or be an easy cut-n-paste if you have one. Plan on attaching your philosophy and expectation documents to your ACAs. And every time you do a feedback, schedule the next one in Outlook.

**Rule #15: Create a personal Style Guide.** Your folks should try to emulate your writing style as much as possible as otherwise you’ll bleed red ink (or tracked changes) on all their drafts and no one likes to see their hard work bleed. You know what you like and do not like, so start a list now and add to it as you go along; send it out regularly so folks can review their drafts and reduce the red ink. *E.g.,* no passive voice (and then train on what passive voice is); one space after period; no contractions; footnotes after punctuation; Oxford comma (or not); no orphans (and the Shift+Ctrl+Space Bar trick to fix); format for repeated AFI references; Article versus Art; “faces” vice “is charged”; phrasal adjectives; “General” vice “sir” or “ma’am.”

**Rule #16: Purchase personalized stationary with your duty title and wing.** May seem old-fashioned, but there is something special about receiving a handwritten note of thanks or congratulations. Get in the habit of sending personalized notes of thanks and kudos to members of your staff and other squadron commanders – it will go a long way.

***Shortly Before [week or two out]***

**Rule #17: Ask your new office to get as much of the technology stuff done before you arrive.** Hard to hit the ground running when you can’t get on to a computer, or the network, or shared drives, or mapped to a printer for days. Your new office should be on this, but doesn’t hurt to ask “what do you need from me …” a couple weeks out as there are some documents they should have sent you by now. You should not impose too much on the office until you’re actually there leading the office, but this is an exception.

**Rule #18: If you want one, let your new office know what you would like to have ready for you in a Smart Book.** We suggest as minimal a burden on your new staff as possible, maybe just the basics. Frankly, if you’ve followed **Rule #11**, in this day and age you probably have electronic access to all the stuff that used to be in “Smart Books” so not sure this is even necessary. But if there are things you’d like printed out to carry around with you for the first couple weeks, ask.

**Rule #19: Have your new office set up 30-minute meetings with commanders/stakeholders, in your preferred order but if possible always your Wing/CC first!** Don’t wait until you get there to set these up as they’ll then take weeks to get them scheduled. Who: CC, CV, CCC, DS, OSI DetCo, SFS/CC and S2I, CE/CC, COP, Gp/CCs, selected Sq/CCs, ADC, SVC, MAJCOM/NAF SJAs. Best practice is to visit them in their office spaces as it will show you respect their time and will give you an opportunity to see their working environment and get acclimated to the base layout. **Pro Tip:** If you and your Wing Commander are going to PSC in at roughly the same time, find out when his or her Change of Command is and be there for it! It’s a shame to show up a day or week after the change-over.

***Start***

**Rule #20: Set up your physical office fully and as soon your stuff arrives.** Send the message that you are all in and have taken ownership. That may mean coming in on the weekend!

**Rule #21: If possible, consider taking PTDY before your PCS to find a house**. The most stressful part of moving, finding a new place to live that balances cost, location, schools, commute distance, and on and on. More likely than not, as the new SJA you are going to be busy the moment you arrive and you want that, but you need to be all in, not out of the office all the time trying to find a place to live.

**Rule #22: Give a presentation to your staff very shortly after you arrive (within a day or two, Day One is good)**. This is your most important meeting. 30 minutes or less; a who-you-are, excited-to-be-here presentation … family pictures, past assignment highlights, your communication style, few likely focus areas, and your biggest-picture expectations/simple rules for the office (*e.g.,* be on time, be kind to people, have a client-centered approach). Bring cookies, cake, ice cream, coffee, something (*see* **Rule #59 – Be ready to spend some $$$**). Nothing heavy at this point – all enthusiasm, save the actual Expectations Brief for some time soon after.

**Rule #23: Make a point to walk to every person’s workspace in the office and have an initial light, quick get-to-know-you conversation in the first couple days.** Hopefully you Roster stalked everyone in the office and know what they do, so no shop talk here … make it all about them and who they are as a person (*e.g.,* family, interests and hobbies). Or if the drive-by isn’t your style, make an appointment to visit them in their office/space to have this same type of conversation. Always note how awesome it was to talk to them, how excited you are to work with them, and that you’ll get together with them later to talk about “work stuff.” You’re not looking to make friends, nor are you trying to come across as “the nice girl or guy,” but you need to demonstrate genuine care about your people as people.

**Rule #24: Check your biases at the door!** No, not the racial or gender kind--if you have those you are in for a world of trouble! Do you like to quote 80’s movies or watch football and NASCAR? Great … but if you bring that into the office and discuss to the exclusion of all other topics, others will feel left out. You gotta meet people where they’re at, not where you are. Your dated references to 80’s sitcoms aren’t as funny as you think. Yes, you need to be your genuine self; don’t force it, but try to understand what is important to your people and focus on that.

**Rule #25: Review the status of your SJA delegation letter(s).** Hopefully your office had these ready to sign on Day One, but you don’t want to be caught not having it when someone (*e.g.,* military judge) asks for it.

**Rule #26: Get “commander” access to various personnel systems: PRDA, AMS.** Your commanders have that and your need is just as great … you can pull SURFs and lots of other data your office will need for various purposes.

**Rule #27: Kill something (not someone) on “Day One.”** Your new office is doing something they don’t like to do and if it is not important for you, kill it. If your DSJA or LOS is a holdover, they’ll know (ask them what they’d like to kill). Decisively show there’s a new sheriff in town. And “Day One” means sooner rather than later … avoid the 21-day habit rule. But …

**Rule #28: Don’t kill something (or someone) on “Day One.”** There is nothing more frustrating than making changes just to make changes. That will sink morale. Take your time (1-3 months) to observe and learn before changing processes. Consider submitting an anonymous SurveyMonkey survey to your office. Ask questions like, “if you were me, what would you change today,” “how can I help you be successful,” “what are three things you would change about the working environment.” **Rule #30**, the **Blow-Up Meetings** rule is the right mechanism to get after change.

**Rule #29: Kill something (maybe someone) eventually.** In your initial Expectations Brief, tell everyone that when you meet with them for those first “work” talks you want them to come armed to discuss three things they like and three things that they don’t like that the office is currently doing. For the three things they don’t like, ask them to provide suggestions on how to improve that dislike. Tell them that you are not promising that you will be able to fix or change everything, but you still want to get their inputs to improve the office. And then use that as a foundation for your Blow-Up meetings or eventual imprinting your vision on the office.

**Rule #30: Schedule “Blow-Up” meetings for every section in the office within the first 20 days.** It takes 21 days to form a habit (allegedly). The longer you wait to bend your office to your will, the harder it will be to fight the day-to-day rush to focus on process improvement. And here’s an excellent approach as to admin: *If it is not required by law, rule, or policy, or does not add substantial value, kill it*.

**Rule #31: Set section goals.** During the Blow-Up meetings is a good time for this. The team(s) needs to know where they are and what they want to achieve. Metrics, outreach and partnering, process improvements = everything. The goals must be measurable so having the “best legal assistance program” is insufficient. With struggling offices and/or inexperienced OICs (which is probably every office), you may need to be very involved in “helping” them define these goals--it can be a challenge to inherit a struggling office with low morale and expect them to know how to succeed so you may have to help them “see” it first.

**Rule #32: Your initial external meetings are not a meet-and-greet, they are a messaging opportunity of what they can expect from you and your office and what you expect of them.** So have a message (*e.g.,* Article 6/SIR process but that you won’t get ahead of command; need for un-schedulable access for pressing justice matters with commanders at all levels; your vision; the desire to be treated as a squadron commander for professional development opportunities (and lunches); finding professional development opportunities for your CGOs and NCOs).

**Rule #33: Don’t have a “seat at the table” during Wing staff meetings, ask for one!** It sends a powerful message on the importance of the JAG to be at the table vice sitting in the cheap seats with the historian, or PA, or whoever. Never hurts to ask … but if you are at the table you need to be an active, but not obnoxious, participant.

**Rule #34: Set a standing weekly meeting (30 mins) on Wg/CC’s calendar.** Tuesdays seem to be the best day, allows time to push packages to the NAF for action that week (well, at least in 3 AF that quickly). Office can know to target/bunch standard packages for that day, conditions your boss to process packages on that schedule, you can cancel if don’t have anything (but good time for mentorship, officership opportunities), think about bringing your AO CGO to brief a package once you’ve establish your relationship with the boss. Though walk-in privileges are also essential (*see* **Rule #35**), having a set time allows you to conduct routine business and use what’s left over for professional development, mentoring, and discussing with your boss what he or she is working on and what non-JAG stuff you may be able to help with (*see* **Rule #90**). When you show up for your standing meeting (really any meeting), be and sound organized: “Sir/Ma’am – I have three items for you today: an administrative discharge package, a court-martial referral, and an ethics legal review for the upcoming XYZ event.”

**Rule #35: But strive for open-door, available-when-needed approach with the Wg/CC.** You need to have conditioned the boss to understand the pop-up nature of, primarily, military-justice issues and your need for immediate access. Use it sparingly and not for matters that could have been handled routinely at your standing meeting but your office let fester until it was urgent. And for the first few months this time and the **Rule #34** time are yours--you eat the face time for the first couple months to build trust and then transition to providing your people an opportunity for that same face time once you have established a solid relationship with your boss.

**Rule #36: Develop a system for “hot” packages.** Often the boss will not be available to talk through an urgent issue so have color-coded covers or something JA-distinctive for need within 24 hours. But again use that sparingly and broadcast as early as possible to Front Office staff it may be coming.

**Rule #37: Get added to CC and CV’s calendars, Group and Squadron email lists.** Sometimes Front Office staff will forget that you are a “commander” as well; never heard of a Wg/CC saying no to his or her SJA being added to any of these lists.

**Rule #38: Figure out where/when the Sq/CC’s meet for a weekly breakfast/lunch and join them (make this a priority every week, if possible).** You will be amazed at how much more effective you will be as a Wing SJA once you become part of this professional and social group of fellow FGOs (also your peer group to hang out with outside of work). Earlier awareness of issues, what’s keeping the Sq/CC’s up at night, what your JA team is doing well (and maybe not as well), opportunity to press your priorities, all goodness.

**Rule #39: Set notifications/calendar reminders in Outlook even if the office has some other tracking mechanism**: Mid-term feedbacks, checking Course Nomination System (at least monthly), MAJCOM/NAF/Wing quarterly awards (at least two weeks before deadline), SCODs, civilian-appraisals, birthdays. There is just so much coming at you that having a head’s up it’s coming rather than reacting will get you ahead of the crush (at least mentally prepared).

**Rule #40: Set expectations as to your availability and live it.** Your office will mirror your behavior. Leave “early” and make it clear you’re leaving (and that you’re unimpressed with folks that work long hours during non-surge periods unless that is just their preferred schedule…that doing so raises prioritization/efficiency issues in your mind). If you have a family, emphasize the importance of being there for your family; find that work-life balance yourself and set that example for your subordinates.

**Rule #41: Learn “Delayed Delivery” in Outlook [Options] and Delay non-urgent emails to staff outside normal duty hours.** Tell a CGO not to work something you email them on a weekend … they’ll work it on the weekend. You’re sending the wrong message if it appears you are working day and night, 7 days a week [maybe you are, but you shouldn’t].

**Rule #42: Do not use unofficial communication means for substantive case work (*e.g.,* Slack, GroupMe, text).** Besides the potential legal peril, the ease of use of these apps will quickly erode the boundaries between work life and life life.

**Rule #43: Watch [and watch out for] social media.** Do not accept friend requests from subordinates (in fact, set this standard with your Expectations Brief … LinkedIn is an exception as it is professional media). Set Google alerts for your installation name and track local community Facebook pages.

**Rule #44: If you fail an open-book test, that’s bad.** The UEI questions are there, the answers are there (the AFI requirements), all you need is to make a culture of self-inspection part of your DNA; do not wait until the last minute to have a substantiation plan. Have a plan, it’ll reduce the stress … though you all put too much stress on yourself over the UEI and the score.

**Rule #45: Military Justice is Job #1 … if you want to do well at the UEI**. Offices typically perform poorly during inspections when their military-justice program is not functioning well. Besides processes (the self-inspection program), you need to quickly gauge the tactical proficiency of your NCOIC of Military Justice. Sit down with your LOS, call the Paralegal Manager, Chief of Justice and maybe D/SJA at the NAF to get a handle on this. Most offices that struggle suffer from lack of technical proficiency due to DSD paralegal tours, NCO cross-trainees with 3-level experience. Same goes for your OIC. Can they handle the job on a day-to-day basis? This is your **top priority**. Justice is a basic, no-fail responsibility of your office.

**Rule #46: Do not miss office PT sessions [and hold them regularly].** The SJA and the Deputy and the LOS should be at every PT session. There is temptation to cancel them entirely or for you to skip because of your meetings and a demanding schedule. People notice when you are not there. They love it when you are. Make it a priority. Let the PT sessions include some team sports (all-inclusive ones aka “easy,” not everyone loves Ultimate Frisbee/Football). The winning goal or touchdown throw may be that junior paralegal’s or junior CGO’s time to shine! Let them have that moment.

**Rule #47: Get a windshield tour of the installation.** As you’ll be giving the Wing Mission Brief (*see* **Rule #57**) this will help you visualize the installation and its mission. Best if you can convince the CE/CC to host this. Also, get the script for this tour from your base protocol office (most have a script for it). There are usually interesting facts in it which you can use when you escort someone around the base. Great also to make the most interesting stops on the windshield tour into an office outing later.

**Rule #48: Crafting a traditional Vision and Mission Statement seems to be a requirement, but also articulate a motto that is philosophical, aspirational, definitional … and marketable.** *E.g.,* The Helpful NAF™, The Center of Litigation [or Leadership] Excellence, America’s Legal Office, First to Fight ▪ Lethal & Light (435 AEW); Litigate: Any Case, Any Place, Any Time … What are you all about in a bumper sticker?

**Rule #49: View your SJA assignment as a 2-year/8-quarter lifecycle.** First quarter or two observe, modify, plan; next four quarters execute your vision; final two quarters sustain the potentially lagging effort. If you are inheriting a struggling office you may need to compress this timeframe, but the structure still works.

**Rule #50: And have an articulable and detailed Vision with a roadmap.** You need to plan for success so consider creating an annual blueprint for success. Map out in advance all the good initiatives and ideas you and the team have come up with and plan to execute. If you don’t, life will get in the way. [Oh, and if your goal isn’t “win MAJCOM LOOTY,” you may want to re-think the breadth of your Vision].

**Rule #51: The best office bonding/planning often occurs outside the office.** Schedule separate monthly breakfast/lunch event with your attorneys, paralegals, and civilians. This provides an opportunity in a social setting for you to spend time with your team outside of the office and to have more casual conversations regarding what’s important to your people (their families, activities/hobbies, upcoming trips, etc.). Try very hard to minimize conversations about work during these social breakfasts/lunches. And plan an off-site office morale event at least once every six month (and be prepared to help fund costs for your junior Airmen, if necessary (see **Rule #59 – Be prepared to spend some $$$**)). If possible, work hard to receive support/approval from your Wing/CC to close the legal office for a full or half day to allow for a morale event during duty hours (people are often much more excited about participating in “mandatory fun” when it’s during the duty day vice after hours).

**Rule #52: Is it Your Deputy or Your Partner … figure out relationship, roles, and communicate that to them and to the office.** You should remember from being one that DSJA is the worst job, all responsibility and no power while straddling both the CGO world and the leadership world. Don’t perpetuate the vicious cycle, figure out substantive roles of ownership for your Deputy (while you mentor them towards their own SJA billet down the road). Consider having your Deputy serve as the “daily operations officer” -- reviewing packages, holding some meetings -- while also giving them ownership responsibility of some substantive aspect of the office mission. This will free your time to lead and provide the necessary vision and direction needed to ensure you have a successful office. [A sample DSJA position/responsibility description is available in FLITE under the SJA/LOS toolbox.]

**Rule #53: Similar to Rule #52, make sure you understand the role and responsibilities of your LOS.** It can be easy for you and the DSJA to make all command decisions without involving the LOS. Don’t do that. Establish them as an integral part of the team, know what they do on a day-to-day basis so you can make sure they are doing what you need them to do. [A LOS position/responsibility description is also available in FLITE under the SJA/LOS toolbox. Also check out the SJA/LOS Checklist and guides in FLITE].

**Rule #54: Show me the money.** Figure this out … how much money does your office have to spend, how much you need, what are your UFRs (don’t know then develop some), budget and budget cycle. Being ready to spend fallout money is a requirement; knowing how to get your priorities funded is an exercise.

**Rule #55: Earn the free money of recognizing your civilian employees … they are too often forgotten.** Identify the last time your civilians received a USAF-level award. Civilians should be considered for such awards (*e.g.,* Air Force Meritorious Civilian Service Award) every few years, just like with uniformed military personnel upon a PCS, but this practice is often overlooked. Your civilians might not tell you they haven’t received an award but they are tracking whether you care enough as a leader to look out for them in the same way you do uniformed personnel. If OCONUS, review special awards programs unique to Local National employees. Civilian employees and Local National employees are the best continuity in an office. This is a no-brainer way to demonstrate that they are valued.

***During***

**Rule #56: You are not overworked or undermanned.** Even if you are, you’re not (publicly). Good leaders finds ways to overcome both; frankly no one wants to hear your whining, and broadcasting this simply tells you people they have an excuse not to be excellent. But. Start thinking creatively for augmentation: fully utilize your Reservists and other Reservists (quad tour, MPA days from Wing or MAJCOM/NAF JA), fight for Wing over-hire billets (Tax Center), “interns” from overmanned squadrons (casual pilots).

**Rule #57: Be able to give the Wing Mission Brief to any audience.** Hard to articulate how Legal supports the mission if you don’t really understand what the mission is. And how impressive for the SJA to be the go-to for giving the brief to visiting dignitaries and interest groups. You’ll buy so much street cred by doing this. Learn it, raise your hand to deliver it whenever possible. You can find the opportunity through your Wing DS. There is usually a list of personnel at each base that have been trained to give the mission brief. These people are called upon for various events and your skill set of presentation and speaking excellence you should make you one of the Wing’s top presenters.

**Rule #58: Similar to Rule #57, know which tenant units are on your base and what their missions are and how they support the DoD enterprise at large**. Ask for a mission brief and/or schedule an office visit to as many units/squadrons on base as possible. Connecting your team members to the mission will excite them, invigorate them, and give them a better understanding as to why what they do matters to the affected person or unit.

**Rule #59: Be prepared to spend some $$$ of your own.** You’re the highest paid person in the office; don’t be seen as nickel-and-diming on every office function. Even if the office has a landing fee or something along those lines, there are always things that pop up you’ll just have to cover (*e.g.,* donuts for the office, flowers for the newborn, the turkey for the Thanksgiving potluck, picking up colleagues lunch, tickets for the Airman for the place you selected as part of your office morale day, coins, patches). Leadership will cost you money and you should be prepared to spend it.

**Rule #60: Make a plan as to how birthdays will be celebrated.** If you decide to recognize everyone’s birthday separately, determine what that celebration will entail and identify who will be responsible for tracking these and who will be responsible for cakes, cards, etc. In a small office this might work, probably not though. The point here is that you want to treat everyone consistently and you don’t want to forget anyone’s birthday. Believe it or not, birthdays matter to a lot of people and if overlooked or forgotten, some feel slighted by the office and especially by you as the SJA. To avoid this from happening, consider scheduling a regular quarterly birthday potluck luncheon to ensure everyone’s special day is remembered, to help share the costs, and to enable some regularly scheduled office mingling and fun.

**Rule #61: The Wing Commander’s secretary [and other Front Office folks] can be the most important person in your professional life.** Don’t be a jerk to them. Bring them holiday candies and office treats. Make small talk and get to know them and their families. Always treat them like they’re the most important people in the world (they are -- they hold all the access cards).

**Rule #62: How to deal with your NAF? I don’t know, I’m asking!** Hopefully you’ll have a NAF like 3AF which lives their motto: The Helpful NAF™ … but unfortunately you may have a NAF that is a non-entity, or a NAF that thinks “functional chain” means chain of command. You’ll have to do some digging before you start to get a sense of where yours will fall on the spectrum, and then have a conversation with the NAF/SJA about expectations both ways. But actions speak louder than words so you’ll come to learn what the NAF’s true approach is over time. Their boss, the NAF/CC, is your bosses’ boss and is rating on you so you probably don’t want to pick a fight with the NAF/SJA, but you also don’t want to be a wet tissue and never push back on something that you think is wrong or could be handled differently. It’s a tough balance, hence the question at the start. More often than not you are better off with regular communication with your NAF, co-opting them into your plans and schemes, and being responsive to their priority/focus areas (and hopefully they also follow **Rule #88, Subordinate’s advancement**). Also, good NAF/SJAs yearn for honest feedback which they don’t always get.

**Rule #63: How to deal with your MAJCOM? I don’t know, I’m asking!** Communicate, communicate, communicate … carefully. We hear that all the time, but honestly, that has been both the key to success as well as the path to disaster in various ways. You don’t want to get in front of your boss, but you also don’t want the NAF or MAJCOM to get blind-sided. You may have what you believe is a novel issue that you’d like to work with your JASOC buddy at the applicable HQ Domain; but going VFR direct may step on efforts your MAJCOM has been making on that issue (as well as overlook that the senior folks at a MAJCOM may have the answer for you already). Open communication is the key; looping the MAJCOM in, even if just FYSA or INFO, can avoid issues. Like your NAF, they want to know how they can help, be top-cover, and get you the answers to help you succeed as that really is their goal. And if you don’t know your MAJCOM/SJA, be sure to introduce yourself. Hopefully you received a congratulatory email when your SJA assignment news hit ONS; but if not, don’t be afraid to introduce yourself--or reconnect if it has been a minute since you last talked with her or him.

**Rule #64: Never have a meeting without a clock … that you stick to.** Never have a meeting is probably a better rule, but if you have one respect everyone’s time, run it professionally by starting and ending it on time (45 minutes should be the max to make everyone at it be efficient).

**Rule #65: Meetings kill productivity; less is more.** Maybe that is an overstatement. But if you’re holding office meetings only to hear what’s going on, you’re doing it wrong. There is no need to waste the time of 3-7 military justice attorneys and paralegals, preparing for the meeting and during the meeting, so they can tell you what they are working on case-by-case. Now, you may have a very involved Wing Commander or NAF/SJA that is calling you daily for updates (frankly, you shouldn’t have this) but otherwise, consider sitting down one-on-one with your CMJ for most updates. Better yet! Just be visible daily in the section and get updates that way.

**Rule #66: Make your Military Justice meeting, which you have to have, productive.** You really have to have a military-justice meeting every week, JAGC expects it and you should do it (and invite OSI to it). Probably need one with Civil Law and/or whatever is driving your Wing’s mission (Ops & Int’l Law are big sections OCONUS). But meetings should focus on big rocks, not every rock, and they are not working sessions--*e.g.,* for military justice you should require AMJAMS updates by COB the night before and you should review those before the meeting to identify errors and focus your questions. Make it clear you are not looking for a walkthrough of every case--too often these meetings are unfocused and devolve into the team reading you the latest AMJAMS update (or telling you stuff that should have already been in AMJAMS, but you didn’t set a night-before deadline so they didn’t make the effort to include them). Same approach to meetings with other Divisions.

**Rule #67: Have an office rotation plan and structure TDYs around that.** It is tempting to not rock a smooth sailing boat, but the only constant in a legal office is change and change if done right can be refreshing and invigorating. You need to have a plan to play musical chairs with your OIC/NCOICs and it needs to be transparent so your people know the change is not conduct/competence based (unless it is), and they can prepare for it. And tying all the training that is available in each of our practice areas to this rotation plan by lining up training TDYs (*e.g.*, courses at AFJAGS, and other institutions) with the timing of the rotations makes a lot of sense.

**Rule #68: You are not an Action Officer … except for Ethics.** If you’re always in the weeds, no one is steering the ship … but you review/sign (or endorse) anything going to Wing/CC … everything else let go (trust but verify--review … for a while) … but if you don’t trust, train.

**Rule #69: Design a JA office OCP patch or coin for your Wing.** If you want to build a culture of excellence, make folks proud to serve in that office. Coming up with the design itself is a teambuilding exercise.

**Rule #70: Your OPR/PRF writing skills are terrible [sorry it’s true], get lots of senior leader help.** If they’re great, awesome (but they aren’t). Ask a senior JAG or even better non-JAG to review and comment. Ask them to walk you through their process/approach (if they don’t have one, move on to the next). Unintentionally badly written OPRs and PRFs have tanked many a JAGs careers, don’t do that. And always remember, do not write like a JAG--our promotion Boards use non-JAG line officers and they will need to understand impact. So “completed 20 Art 15s in two hours” means nothing; focus on processing improvements, wing-wide impacts = leadership. Send your own draft OPR to a senior JAG or two and non-JAG to review it before you submit it. Your Wing CC will assume what you provide is good to go.

**Rule #71: Your bullet writing skills in general are terrible [again sorry], get on Wing Staff and Wing Award panels.** With the new stratification rules (on the officer side) it will be harder to differentiate and highlight your folks, so awards become more important. So you need wins. Best way to “game” the system is to get exposure to how people write awards that win. You’ll learn that by sitting on any panel you can.

**Rule #72: Make a point to do a walk around the office and stop by everyone’s office on a routine basis.** Consider a quick morning round once a week to check in with folks, ask about the weekend and their families. Get to know the names of their children/partners/dogs. Knowing these details shows you care about your team members and that you also know what is really important to your folks. Similarly, remember to do evening rounds, before you’re headed out, *see* **Rule #40 Set expectations**, to check in and understand why some folks are staying late on a frequent basis. This may help you understand if your folks have a time-management issue (they do), need help prioritizing work (they do), or if the distribution of work in the office needs reconsideration (maybe). A check-in at the end of the day might also help you identify someone who is struggling with a personal issue.

**Rule #73: Make your CGOs send you a minimum of one bullet every week.** Good practice for them, gives you data for OPRs and award packages that you won’t get when they scramble at the last minute to reconstruct what they did over the last quarter/year. Create an Outlook file for each CGO and dump the bullets in there. And do this for yourself as well!!!

**Rule #74: A month into the quarter, forecast “most likely” nominees for Quarterly Awards and start bolstering their eventual packages.** You have to be proactive to field competitive nominees and a competitive nominee does more than just great work, gotta deliberately bolster the “self-improvement,” “volunteer,” “initiative” categories as well. With tighter strat rules, awards become more and more important and while WSA wins are nice, you should be gunning for Wing-level awards. Success will take planning. If at the end of the quarter you’re asking “who should we nominate?” … you’re doing it wrong.

**Rule #75: Take Awards at all levels (Wg/NAF/MAJCOM/TJAG) and timeframes (month/quarter/ annual) seriously.** Fact: No one dislikes winning an award and being recognized for a job well done. No matter how introverted they seem, people appreciate being recognized. Use this to your advantage to build morale, confidence, and develop your people. This is an easy way to show people that you care about them and you recognize their contributions. People do not like being ignored, forgotten, or unappreciated. Even if your nominees don’t win, make it a public showing that they are your nominees because they were awesome in that time period and they are the center of your world for that time period. It goes a long way in building relationships, loyalty, and pride in their work and office. Also, their win is your win, which helps for the next rule . . .

**Rule #76: Involve everyone in putting together the LOOTY [Law Office of the Year] Award package.** This is a great team-building opportunity. Everyone contributes, everyone’s voices are heard, everyone takes pride in the great work everyone has done.

**Rule #77: Don’t forget your Reservists. You’ll forget your Reservists.** You’ll have no idea what a “good year” is or what the R/R is. Call your IMA immediately, schedule them to come in to educate and plan, hold a meet-and-greet with your Reservists as a group and then feedback individually (Zoom), have a plan to develop them and periodically review the plan. Empower your IMA to the SJA to be just that … SJA for the reservists; they should help with awards, OPRs, etc.--it helps them develop leadership skills too. Plan your leave to coincide with your IMA to the SJA tours--this will give them leadership opportunity without the appearance of having two bosses. Also, consider telework agreements and points-only projects to augment your manning needs! Remember to track their OPR and EPR close out dates (SCODs), deadlines for step promotions as well as due dates for PRFs. Finally, remember to call your Reservists when promotion results come out, especially if they are not selected for promotion!

**Rule #78: Your goal is to work yourself out of a job.** If you’re the single point of failure in your office, you’re doing it wrong. Your job is to lead and develop those below you; empower them to learn their craft and take ownership of their programs, then trust them to lead. After a short while, you should not be reviewing every package (unless it is going to the Wg/CC).

**Rule #79: If you are still overwhelmed in your job after six months the reason may be external, but there’s a good chance it’s internal … time for some introspection.** If you’re the hardest working person in the office, you’re doing this leadership thing the wrong way. One of the biggest JAG transition is to learn to let go, trust, and delegate. As a leader, your job is to develop your people, not to do their job for them. You need to learn what is a true “fire-able” offense and what is a teachable moment. It’s okay to take some risk to let people “fail” and learn on the job. The key is having a plan to catch them before they fall--this is where you need to have visibility on the issue, but allow space for your AO’s to execute. Won’t say the job becomes “easy,” it will always be busy, but if you’ve led by imprinting your vision on the office and you have everyone pulling in the same direction (with processes facilitating that), then there should be some stability at about the 6-month point. If not, dive in and figure out how to adjust fire (and maybe pull out a mirror).

**Rule #80: Demonstrate that personal time is as important as professional time.** Work-life balance--whatever! We say and hear the words, but so many times we do not live it. I [AD] fell into that trap in my first assignment as an O-6. Now, in my last assignment, I make the effort to prioritize my family events, even if it means I have to leave at 1600 occasionally. If your team sees you making time for family, friends, pets, traveling, hobbies, etc., they will feel more comfortable doing the same. There is a balance. It is obviously not an every-day type thing, but don’t miss that event in your family’s life--I promise you in five years, you will likely not remember why you missed out on it just that you missed out on it.

**Rule #81: Take the hit to “office manning” – give up your CGOs/paralegals as PROJOs for Wing events, jump at deployment opportunities for them.** The work will never stop. But if you are denying your people professional development opportunities in order to make your life easier, you are failing as a leader. The investment in them, demonstrating you care about their professional development, will pay dividends in the long run.

**Rule #82: Beautify the place.** Aggressively pursue Unfunded Requests (UFRs) through the Wing. Determine what needs improving (*e.g.*, photos, desks, furniture, courtroom technology or layout), build your requirements, and submit as soon as possible to your RA. One of us has literally funded over $500,000 across two Wings on projects just to improve the office.

**Rule #83: Have an exit interview with PCS’ing personnel.** Take the time to say goodbye and wish them luck in their next jobs. Let them know you’ll be there for them if they need anything in the future. You will always be their SJA. Also take the opportunity to see what they think how you can do better and how to improve the office. Don’t make it into a grievance rant, keep it constructive. There’s nothing like honest feedback when they are going out the door.

**Rule #84: Smooth the way for your people by emailing their next boss (deployed boss).** If you are enthusiastic about one of your folks who is moving on, broadcast that enthusiasm to their next boss--it will give them a leg up (but be honest, you’re vouching for them).

 ***General Thoughts***

**Rule #85: SJA is a leadership job, be a leader ≠ just a manager, or Action Officer (mostly).** Yes you are a technical expert in a variety of areas, but just making the trains run on time is not leadership. Leadership is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. You need to be able to fill in this blank. What is it? Never forget that you are a leader and study your craft and learn all you can about it.

**Rule #86: Toxicity Kills.** Do not be a toxic leader. Nothing kills morale and mission faster than a toxic leader. This job is not about you. Be a kind and considerate leader. You don’t need to be a jerk to execute a mission.

**Rule #87: Check your attitude.** Yes, there are different (and effective) leadership styles. But a positive attitude is infectious. Your subordinates do not know you are new to this--you’re the “old JAG” now. If you are visibly stressed or short with your staff, that will set the tone. Rather than motivating by fear of failure, you want your team to strive for excellence by pushing the boundaries and not fearing failure. Displaying a calm-under-pressure, “we got this” and “I will support you” attitude sets the right condition and culture for success. As SJA you can’t fix morale, but you set the tone: stay positive, focus on the big rocks, and organize fun events--potlucks, chili cook-offs, movie nights--those things matter.

**Rule #88: Place your subordinates’ advancement over yours and yours will flow naturally.** When it’s clear your main goal is to get promoted, your subordinates won’t be properly motivated. When it’s clear your main goal is their advancement, they will be motivated to excel and that excellence will make your office, and thus you, shine even brighter.

**Rule #89: Knowledge is not power and hoarding it is the root of many leadership fails.** If it is not close-hold, don’t hold it close, share it with the team so they will feel like they are part of a team that is part of a larger whole. Do you know what TJAG said during the last MAJCOM synch were his priorities or what he highlighted was happening up at HHQ level? You should, it should have been shared with you, and you should share it with your staff. Same with your Wing/CC’s weekly staff meeting. Transparency with your office on internal and external issues will ensure support and buy-in.

**Rule #90: Be an officer-first, force-multiplier for your boss.** You have a tremendous skill set that is useful outside your legal expertise. You are an excellent writer, public speaker, planner, and organizer. Be lead for projects outside the legal world (*e.g.*, be project officer for the Wing’s Outstanding Unit Award nomination).

**Rule #91: Make yourself indispensable to your boss, dispensable to your office.** *See* every Rule here**.** A high-functioning office functions without your constant presence.

**Rule #92: Preach checklist discipline and inspect your expectations.** You have to be involved and show interest in your teams. Ask to see their checklists until you’re confident your team is proficient in their job. Following a checklist is not just about compliance; it demonstrates excellence. If the team learns how to do their job excellently, they will be complying with checklists which really is the entire playbook for success and doing the job well.

**Rule #93: Set a constructive debrief culture in your office, starting from the top.** You are going to make mistakes, own them and discuss them freely. Sitting around a table chatting and saying, “you know when I did X this week, I don’t think I did it well, I think I probably should have done Z. What do you all think?” Do this often enough, you’ll get constructive feedback (which all leaders should relish) and it’ll make giving constructive feedback (and the target accepting it as something other than personal criticism) much easier.

**Rule #94: If everything is important, nothing is important.** If every tasker is treated the same, the “work” will never stop and training, professional development, and opportunities to enhance morale will pass you buy. The Med Group’s fundraiser request can wait, not every Civil Law suspense has to have a 72-hour deadline.

**Rule #95: The benefit of squeezing out the last 5-10% to get to perfection is non-existent as only you will notice the difference.** Do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Sometimes, you just need to get the job done and get it over the finish line. You’ll never be perfect and striving for it will grind you and your people down, rendering perfection ever farther and farther away.

**Rule #96: Be decisive, even if wrong.** Solicit advice and guidance, but you decide. Indecisive leaders fail as they render their offices rudderless.

**Rule #97: Take a class or read a book on giving constructive (negative) feedback**. As a leader, you will need to have awkward conversations. Don’t delegate all of those to your Deputy. You will have to deliver bad news. Speak to other senior leaders about this and get their suggestions for handling those conversations. One tip for addressing a weakness in someone is to focus on their potential, point out the area for growth and indicate you don’t want that to be the thing that holds them back. Then offer suggestions to improve that area: writing class, nutrition coaching, email professionalism, etc.

**Rule #98: Adopt Col BT’s leadership sandwich**. It’s about setting your expectations of your people between the floor and the standard you hold yourself to--in order to ensure you’re not chasing your ideal of perfection at the expense of morale.

**Rule #99: At the end of your tour, smooth the way for your replacement!** Schedule turn over sessions on Zoom, create a Smart Book with updated phone rosters, maps, reports, and identify the big rocks they will need to carry to the finish line. Show your team that you are excited about your replacement and the expertise they will bring. Leave a note on your desk for your replacement, welcoming them to the office and wishing them well! Consider leaving them a small welcome gift such as a unit mug, local favorite food/drinks and/or a unit patch so they are squared away and properly in uniform on Day One.