

So You Want To Be A Post Commander?

Top 10 Ideas for Your Consideration

Every family business, farm, non-profit organization, etc. must plan for its leadership succession. This is true for American Legion Posts as well.

Change is good when the time is right. It allows new ideas and energy to come in to the situation. It provides an opportunity for members to gain leadership experience and to move up in the American Legion organization. The best sources for District and Department leaders are Post Commanders and other Post Officers and Committee Chairs.

Maybe you are thinking about taking on the responsibilities of a Post Officer or Committee Chair position? What do you need to know and do to be successful? Should you run for election? Can you be successful if elected? These are simple questions. The answers are much more complex.

Thinking about the position of Post Commander, here are some of my thoughts on these questions. I present these ideas with the benefit of almost 5 years of experience as a Post Commander, and almost 4 years of experience as a District Junior Vice Commander.

I also must credit the help, support, and guidance of all the Georgia Post 160 Commanders who preceded me. I want to mention Bill Lienhop who went on to serve as the 5th District and Department of Georgia Commander, and Harold Watkins who went on to serve as the 5th District Commander and serves now as Commander of VFW Rainbow Post 2681. These great Legionnaires mentored me all along the way, and continue to do so.

Here are my top 10 things to think about if you are considering running for election as a Post Commander.

1. Have the Heart of a Servant Leader: Serving as a Post Commander is not about personal ambition or self-aggrandizement. Check your ego at the door. If you are not focused on helping others and on serving others, this job is not for you. Entire books have been written that define what “servant leadership” means. I will leave it to you to do that research.

2. Love the American Legion and what it stands for: You must understand and appreciate the “4 Pillars” of the American Legion and what they represent. Know the history of the American Legion and what it has done. Know what the American Legion stands for today and what it plans to accomplish.

The job of being a Post Commander will soak up all the time and energy you wish to put into the job. If you don’t love the American Legion, you will lose focus on what is really important. It will be too easy to find excuses for not giving 100% to the job if you are not truly committed to the American Legion.

3. Provide Moral and Ethical Leadership: I believe everyone knows what this means, and can recognize it when they see it. Members also quickly recognize leaders who do not display these qualities. If members see a leader more concerned with how their position can benefit themselves, they will not support that person.

Here are but a few examples of how a leader can err without thinking, in ways that the membership will notice.

- The Commander helps themselves to food or beverage because “I earned it through my work at the Post” when the members have to pay for theirs.
- The Commander goes first through any lines for anything, on the basis of “I’m the Commander and I’m the most important person.” If whatever members are in line for to get happens to run out, and they don’t get any, they will long remember that the Commander made sure to get his or hers without making sure all the members first received theirs.
- The Commander always makes sure to take credit for everything, because “I’m the Commander” and fails to first give credit to those who did the work.

4. “Lead, Follow or Get Out of the Way”: This is an old Army Infantry motto that applies well to anyone in any organization. What does it mean?

First, if you are in a leadership position, take the lead and show the way. In the Infantry, another well-known motto is “*Follow Me.*” A real leader doesn’t sit back and issue orders to others. A real leader will not ask anyone to do what they are not willing to do. They will show the way through leading by example.

If you are not the leader, be a good follower. Don’t argue, criticize and second-guess every leadership decision and action. No one can be a good leader if they don’t have good followers. And every leader is following another leader higher in the chain of command. This is where teamwork is so important. Support the team and the leaders.

If you are not the leader, and you find yourself unable to follow the leader, then step aside. Don’t criticize the people doing the work by saying the work can’t be done. Exit gracefully. You may find yourself “eating crow” later, and it’s much harder to do if you exited with a bang.

5. Understand Business and Financial Reporting: Running an American Legion Post is very much like running a small business. The Post Commander must be able to understand revenues and expenses, and to know where both are coming from. This requires attention to detail every week, sometimes every day.

You don’t have to have a degree in Finance, but you should be familiar with how to read a financial statement. Be able to interpret the information so you know what it is telling you. Are you making a profit, or taking a loss? What are the major sources of revenues? What are the major expenses? Know your main monthly expenses and large annual expenses like insurance, licenses and permits, etc. Are you adequately funding depreciation?

If these areas are not your strength, be sure you have a Finance Officer who understands budgets and reporting. Then, ask questions and listen carefully to the answers. Ask questions and listen until you understand what you are being told. Be able to explain it to the other Board members, or have your Finance Officer do it for you.

6. Act Like a Small Business Owner: Be personable and interact with your members and guests in your Social Quarters and meetings. When people go to a restaurant they like it when a manager stops by and asks them how they are doing, if the service or food or beverage was satisfactory, etc. Care about the members and their experiences when in the Post. If you don't care about them, they won't care about you or the Post. Ensure new faces are welcomed.

7. "Don't Shoot the Messenger": Someone once told me, "Your best friends will tell you what you need to know, not what you want to hear." When you receive unpleasant information, think about it before reacting to it. Is the information true? Does the information display a failure of some kind that should be rectified? Is there something different that can be done to fix the problem or improve the experience? If the answer to any of these kinds of questions is "Yes" then act like a leader and fix the issue.

The first time you "shoot the messenger" (in other words, you attack the person giving you the information, instead of attacking the problem), that will be the last "message" you ever get from that person, or any other person within hearing range. Be grateful for members caring enough to share their concerns with you. It is far better to know what problem areas you have. Problems you know about can be fixed.

8. Make Your Post Relevant to the Community: For any Post to be successful, it must be active in its community. The Post Commander must lead the efforts to help and support its neighbors.

What does your Post do for your community? What should your Post do for the community?

To answer the last question, refer back to the "4 Pillars of the American Legion." Look at the programs and committees of your Department for ideas. A Post can't do everything for everyone, but you can do some things to help some people. Here are just a few examples to consider.

- Partner with your city or county government to plan and conduct appropriate public ceremonies on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.
- Schedule blood drives.
- Work with local schools to teach patriotism, flag etiquette, support high school JROTC programs, etc.
- Operate a Food Pantry to help local families with food needs.
- Conduct fund raising events to support local or national charities.
- Build relationships with local elected officials and community leaders to enable the Post to partner with local governments, churches or non-profit agencies to serve the needs of the community.

The possibilities are endless, limited only by imagination and volunteers. Whatever you decide to focus on, do it well.

If your Post is destroyed by a tornado someday (speaking hypothetically), and no one in the local community notices it or cares, then you failed as the Post Commander. If your Post is not doing work relevant to the community, the community will not care about or support your Post.

9. Help Veterans in Need: When a Veteran shows up at your Post, get to know them. Don't judge them. Many Veterans end up joining the American Legion because a Post helped them with something along the way.

If they need help with the VA, put them in touch with your Service Officer. If they need food, feed them. If they need money for gas or bus fare, help them. Often this will mean that you will "pass the hat" at the Post, or dig out money from your own wallet.

The most important thing is to never turn your back on a Veteran in need. Make contact with local resources that can help Veterans with housing, food, health services, etc. Know where to refer Veterans in need and where they can get help.

10. Work with the American Legion Family: Most Posts have, or should have, representation of the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA), the Sons of the American Legion (SAL), and the American Legion Riders (ALR). The SAL and ALR are committees of the American Legion. The Post Commander has some authority over their operations and ultimate control over their finances. The ALA is a totally separate organization and operates independently of the Post.

One of your first acts should be to sit down with the leaders of the Legion Family organizations at your Post. Ask what you can do to help them in their missions. Find out if there are any unresolved issues between them and the Post. If yes, promise to fix them, and then do it.

Abraham Lincoln in 1858 gave a famous speech in which he said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." He was speaking then about the United States. The same rule applies to the Legion Family at a Post. There cannot be arguing and fighting between the Legion Family members and their leaders. The leaders of all the organizations must work together, find common ground, set aside egos and past grievances, and move forward united.

The Post Commander sets the tone of that relationship. How the Post Commander handles the situation will determine the success of the Post and its operations.

In addition to the Legion Family at the Post, the Commander must work with the District and Department Officers. Support them in their actions (see rule # 4 above). Provide District and Department with required reports and information. Anticipate their requests and work with them in the spirit of cooperation. Seek to help other Posts and Legionnaires in any ways you can.

11. (Bonus Thought) Mentor Future Leaders: Always think about mentoring future Post leaders. Find members who can do more for your Post and ask them to get involved. Help junior Officers and Committee Chairs learn about the American Legion. Ask them what their

goals are and what they hope to achieve and accomplish. Teach them what they need to know to be successful. Introduce them to your contacts in the American Legion and the community who can help them. Ensure they receive training and resources to do their work.

When you leave as Post Commander, who will replace you? Do you have leaders trained and ready to step forward? It is your responsibility to ensure the answer is yes. Sometimes you may have to give a good leader a little “push” to step forward. They are much more likely to do so if they know you will be there to help and support them.

I hope these ideas help you think about how to become more involved in the American Legion. Don't try to start too high. Take any position in the Post that interests you, and then do the job the best you can. Learn everything you can about the American Legion and the Post. Attend training offered by your District or Department, or by National.

I wish you the very best and great success in your American Legion endeavors. Let me know if I can help you. Good luck!

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