



JULIET FUNT GROUP

# Passing the Baton: Bringing Intentionality to Military Command Transitions

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Long-Form White Paper prepared by the Juliet Funt Group (JFG) | May 5, 2025

### THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

Military command transitions represent critical inflection points with far-reaching consequences. Like the decisive moment in a championship relay race, the handoff between commanders determines whether organizational momentum accelerates or falters. This precision exchange—occurring thousands of times annually across the armed forces—directly impacts operational effectiveness, strategic continuity, and the life experience of service members.

Yet, our research reveals a profound disconnect: while military organizations invest years in leader development, they devote minimal resources to ensuring smooth transitions between those leaders. The stark reality is **fewer than 4% of commanders surveyed reported receiving comprehensive preparation** during their most recent command handoff. Nearly a quarter never even met their predecessor. This systemic gap represents both an urgent challenge and an extraordinary opportunity.

This white paper presents a framework for upgrading command transitions from administrative ceremonies into deliberate strategic processes that honor the mission, empower the people and reduce risk.

### METHODOLOGY

This white paper was researched and developed by the *Juliet Funt Group* (JFG), a training firm specializing in organizational effectiveness and professional discipline. Our findings derive from a blended research approach including:

- More than 40 in-depth interviews with flag officers, senior enlisted leaders, intelligence community executives, corporate leaders, authors and academics
- Supplemental survey data from 55 commanders across multiple service branches
- Cross-sectional representation from Army, Air Force, Marines, AFSOC, SOCOM, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and CIA

The paper is organized into three complementary sections addressing vital aspects of the command transition process:

**PART 1: Leading Up** examines how both outgoing and incoming commanders prepare before the official handoff—shaping conditions, relationships, and knowledge exchange to influence transition success.



**PART 2: Leading On** focuses on the critical early days after assuming command—how new leaders establish momentum, build trust, and communicate intent while honoring the organization they've inherited.

**PART 3: Application Toolbox** distills key tools from interviews, research, and field practice into further actionable guidance for commanders and staff at all stages of the transition process.

These three tracks work together to address what social psychologist Kurt Lewin identified in his Force Field Analysis. Effective transitions occur when commanders deliberately *strengthen* driving forces of successful change (through logistics and visioning) while *weakening* restraining forces that maintain the status quo (through communication and awareness of potential distractors). Each part includes practical insights, stories from real-world leaders, and strategic recommendations for the three characters in this story: incoming commanders, outgoing commanders and staff.

#### **SURVEY DATA HIGHLIGHTS:**

- Fewer than 25% of incoming commanders felt they were fully prepared for command.
- 23% of incoming commanders never met their predecessor, even virtually.
- Fewer than 43% of incoming commanders felt adequately prepared by their predecessor.
- 57% of leaders thought adequate time together and improved communication needed to be amplified in transition.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

Our research uncovered five critical areas of focus that enable exceptional leadership transitions:

- 1) Preparation Impact:** Building strong handoff infrastructure dramatically improves command readiness—a crucial opportunity since our research revealed a significant preparation deficit across military leadership transitions.
- 2) Mindset Transformation:** Reconceptualizing handoffs as sacred exchanges requiring disciplined planning transforms their effectiveness and organizational impact.
- 3) Quality Time:** Dedicated interaction between incoming and outgoing commanders represents the most valuable transition asset—a resource that must be deliberately prioritized and protected.
- 4) Information Curation:** Finding the balance between overwhelming data dumps and complete lack of documented knowledge.
- 5) Staff Experience:** Recognizing how staff members absorb transition friction while maintaining operations allows commanders to provide appropriate support.

These insights form the foundation for the practical approaches detailed throughout the white paper.



## TRANSITION TECHNIQUES

The paper offers numerous concrete techniques drawn directly from successful military leaders across services. Below are representative examples that can be implemented by each key participant in the transition process:

### Example Tools for Outgoing Commanders:

- Book of Secrets: Documenting battle rhythm, culture, personnel, and projects
- Hard Stuff Day: Dedicated time to resolve pending issues before departure
- Three Up/Three Down: Index card exercise for anonymous team feedback
- Vision Past Your Exit: Long-term planning approach for road-mapping
- Spouse Continuity Binder: A concise guide produced to support family networks

### Example Tools for Incoming Commanders:

- Looking for the Good: Finding existing momentum before suggesting changes
- Strategic Alignment Map: Visual nesting of priorities from HQ down to unit level
- Specific Prep Schedule: Battle rhythm of meetings and knowledge transfer
- The Cager: Simple document outlining working style and feedback questions
- The Jane Goodall Approach: Observation before action during assessment phase

### Example Tools for Staff:

- Change Coupons: Understanding the team's finite capacity for change
- Community Cards: Digital profiles capturing key stakeholders' information
- We're Not There Yet: Countering "anticipatory grief" during transitions
- Communication Preferences Tracking: Adapting to different commander styles
- Transition Surge Plan: Managing workload during leadership changeover

## CONCLUSION

Military leadership transitions represent a strategically underutilized lever for organizational excellence. By bringing greater intentionality to these critical handoffs, the military can preserve institutional knowledge, accelerate operational momentum, and avoid mission risk.

The command handoff is ultimately an act of generosity rather than ownership. This perspective transforms transition from an administrative event into a deliberate process honoring both the mission and the people who carry it forward. The principles in this paper offer a framework for transitions that strengthen rather than disrupt operational continuity—ensuring that change never becomes the reason the enemy gains ground or the mission loses it.

**[ACCESS THE FULL PAPER HERE](#)**

