

Lessons in Leadership: Simple and Uncomplicated

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As the father of a toddler, I have recently discovered the awesome task of teaching him some valuable life lessons. Share. Be nice. Treat others with respect. It occurred to me that many of these lessons seem to be forgotten by many military leaders.

In my twelve years of commissioned service, I have spent hours upon hours learning about leadership. From classroom study to lectures to reading anything I can get my hands on, my quest to unlock the secrets of leadership have known no bounds. But I realized the simple lessons I am teaching my son – the same lessons my parents taught me when I was growing up - translate directly to my experience as the commanding officer of a ship.

I have come up with a list of simple, yet effective, lessons for any leader. These lessons may seem dull and a simple, but I have attempted to illustrate each with my own command leadership experiences and explain why they are relevant.

Be nice. Say thank you. Share. Tell the truth.

You have heard all of these. No one will dispute they are all important life lessons. They are also crucial lessons you must master if you are to be an effective leader.

Be Nice

Nice guys finish last. So the saying goes. Plenty of people subscribe to this saying, and in the process ignore a very powerful leadership tool. Colin Powell, in his book “It Worked for Me” notes that kindness is a sign of confidence.¹ Showing kindness, displaying a cheerful disposition and being pleasant are ways you can enhance your authority and strengthen your organization.

Being nice can lead to the commitment of followers. Commitment is preferred over compliance because committed followers have personal ownership in the organization and are

¹ Powell, Colin, *It Worked for Me* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 48.

devoted to mission accomplishment. Followers who merely comply with directives and orders may influence short-term behavior but is not effective for long term or steady results. Leaders can gain commitment through the use of referent power. Referent power, a subset of personal power, is “the power generated by relationships” and “has the highest potential of all the forms of power to gain strong commitment from followers.”² As a leader, the challenge is identifying what tactics can be used to apply referent power.

Showing kindness, or simply being nice, is an easy and effective way to apply referent power and achieve commitment from your followers. This falls into the category of “soft tactics” which are “associated with personal power” and is “effective at gaining follower commitment.” One soft power technique is relationship building, where “leaders build positive rapport and a relationship of mutual trust...”³ Showing kindness to your subordinates can lead to a strong senior-subordinate relationship where the junior feels valued and committed to the organization.

While being a “nice guy” has merits, that is not always what the troops want or need. “You want somebody who can take charge and get the job done even if he is a little rough sometimes. You are going to favor that guy over somebody who wants to hold your hand and pat you on the back all the time. Troops know the difference.”⁴ There will be times when you need to be forceful, raise your voice and ruffle some feathers. But use these techniques judiciously. As they may lead to short-term accomplishments, they will not necessarily inspire long-term commitment.

² Klann, Dr. Gene, “The Application of Power and Influence in Organizational Leadership,” reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College *L100 Book of Readings* (Fort Leavenworth: USACGSC, August 2011), 64-65.

³ Ibid. 67.

⁴ Reed, COL George E., “Toxic Leadership,” *Military Review* 67-71 (July-August 2004); reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College *L100 Book of Readings* (Fort Leavenworth: USACGSC, August 2011), 155.

Being nice may not come naturally for many leaders, but it is very simple. Smile. Shake people's hands. Walk around and talk to people. Ask them about their life outside of work. Be an active listener and give people your full attention.

While in command, I went to great lengths to be nice. By using kindness as an influence tactic, I sought my crew's trust and commitment. I made it a point to regularly walk around the ship and engage Sailors in friendly conversation. I adhered to the leadership tenant of praise in public, reprimand in private. I wanted my crew to enjoy coming to work and work in a friendly environment where they were respected. I knew that we could achieve a positive climate only if I, the Commanding Officer, set the right tone.

Say Thank You

Rewards in the military are commonplace. They are given for everything from valor in combat, high achievement during a tour of duty, or exceptional marks during an inspection. Rewards are recognition for a job well done. The military reward system ranges from the formal: medals and certificates; to the informal: a well deserved day off from the Commanding Officer or a pat on the back accompanied by a "Good job." A reward, regardless of the level and formality, is a way the leader says "Thank you." Saying thank you, in whatever way you deem necessary, can have a tremendous effect on your unit's morale. The opposite is true if you neglect to show appreciation.

Morale is an issue of concern for a leader because it is the intangible element that bonds a unit together and will keep it fighting in difficult situations. In the words of Gen. William T. Sherman, "...no general can accomplish the full work of his army unless he commands the soul of his men..."⁵ High morale has a direct effect on a unit's performance and combat readiness.

⁵ Department of the Army, *FM 6-22, Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, October 2006), 7-8.

There are many jobs in the military that have the potential to erode morale and have a negative effect on unit readiness. Taking out the trash, cleaning the galley, toilets and showers. These are not jobs recruiters advertise, but every junior Sailor has done them. These are far from the glamorous jobs seen on T.V. ads and billboards and definitely not why people join the military. Even though the filthy and thankless jobs must be done, they can wreck the morale of a Sailor and thus affect the morale of the unit. The challenge for the leader is to recognize what can drive spirits down and how to mitigate low morale.

Rewards can build and enhance morale within the unit. A leader has reward power, a subset of positional power and can be an effective way to change and influence behavior in an organization.⁶ When in a position of leadership, you have the power to reward your followers, which “can be highly motivational.”⁷ In addition to being a source of power, rewarding is a type of influence technique that can be used to effectively change behavior. Leaders control certain resources valued by the unit. As the leader, you have the ability to give these resources out in a way to recognize and reward certain behaviors.⁸ By rewarding the behaviors you want to see and punishing the behaviors you do not want to see, you will eventually see a shift to the desired behaviors.

My crew worked hard and took a lot of pride in their efforts. I took every opportunity I could to say thank you and recognize their work. I wanted to continue the positive momentum of working hard, and I also wanted to build a culture within the ship where we valued industriousness. I also looked for ways to recognize Sailors who did the little things right, did

⁶ Klann, “The Application of Power and Influence in Organizational Leadership,” 63.

⁷ Ibid. 63.

⁸ *FM 6-22*, 7-5.

their job at a consistently high level, or came to work with a positive attitude everyday. I saw the behaviors that would make our culture positive and one of excellence and I rewarded those actions.

With the assistance of our Supply Officer, we created the Impact Award. The Impact Award was given by me to Sailors who did anything noteworthy. Sailors could be nominated by their chain of command or by anyone in a leadership position. I, as the Commanding Officer decided whether or not to present the award. The award consisted of a small pin in the shape of a mine that could be worn on a ship's ball cap as well as a 24-hour liberty pass. Once I decided the recipients were deserving of recognition, I wasted no time in making the award presentation. The award "ceremony" was short and informal; it was immediately followed by my telling the crew over the ship's announcing system of the award, the recipient and why the Sailor's actions were significant.

Impact Awards were awarded for everything from emergent equipment repairs to maintaining a clean and neat work area. I wanted Sailors to know I appreciated their efforts. If we were to do the little things right and be excellent in everything we did, I knew I had to reward the behavior that would lead to excellence. I also knew the crew highly valued time off. By rewarding them with what they wanted and saying thank you in a public way, I was able to cultivate the types of performance that would lead to a successful command.

Share

Every leader knows teamwork is an essential component to an organization's success. At the heart of teamwork is the concept of sharing. When individuals are willing to give of themselves, to share what they have with their teammates, teamwork and cohesion ensue. The

mark of a well-led organization is one where helping teammates is the norm. When the team can function as one, it is greater than the talents or abilities of any single individual.

Teamwork can allow a team to overcome even the most challenging circumstances. Invariably, in the course of your leadership experience, you will realize you and your team have more requirements than resources. You won't have enough time, money, parts or manpower. You will always be able to use extra help. However, it isn't just you who can use the help; it may be one of your subordinate units that need a helping hand or even one of your peers. Everyone can use assistance from their teammates. In the military, no matter what the echelon, we are part of a team. Anyone in the military can look around and find teammates who are capable of helping overcome an obstacle and reach the objective. The challenge for the leader is to build a culture where resources are shared in your organization and everyone works toward a common goal.

The leader's job is to build a "team orientation." This is done by creating experiences where team coherence is refined and enhanced.⁹ In psychologist Bruce Tuckman's Group Development Model, the storming phase is where the foundation for teamwork is laid. It is also where potential exists to block effective team building. In this stage, there is potential for rivalry within the group where individuals resist the push for cooperation. The leader must employ processes that promote cooperation among teammates. A cooperative environment is characterized, among other things by "a readiness to be helpful."¹⁰ An organization where

⁹ Aude, Steven, Baranowski, Laura, Conrad, Trevor, Harvey, Jennifer, Mitchell, Deb, Weingart, Eric, Fallsen, Jon, "Leadership Competencies Applied to Army Leader Development Processes: Extend the Competency Framework to Address Organizational and Situational Differences," Technical Report (Unpublished) for the United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 42-54 (November 2005); reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College *L100 Book of Readings* (Fort Leavenworth: USACGSC, August 2011), 269.

¹⁰ Ibid. 270.

colleagues are willing to sacrifice and share their resources will lead to mutual trust, commitment and eventually pride.¹¹ The leader must determine what processes to use that will result in a culture of helping, sharing and unity of effort.

Creating a culture of sharing and teamwork is a difficult task for any leader, but as Coach Mike Krzyzewski notes, “People, generally, want to be on a team...want to be part of something bigger than themselves...want to be in a situation where they feel that they are doing something for the greater good.¹²” You will have followers who want to help their teammates and share whatever it takes to get team wins. This is exactly what I experienced while in command.

Going into my command tour, I knew there were deep divisions within all Navy ships, mainly between departments and divisions. Also, rivalries between ships, which are generally healthy and spirited in nature, can get ugly and have negative consequences on a maritime fighting force. I looked for ways my crew could build cohesion through sharing its means, eventually establishing a culture where we worked as one, not a group of individuals. Internally, I knew there would be things that could employ the entire crew as one team. Cleanliness is not only a requirement onboard a ship, but it is a great way to build team unity. Washing the exterior of the ship while underway was always an all-hands evolution. Even though only a few divisions were responsible for the day-to-day cleanliness of the ship’s exterior, a thorough scrubbing is very manpower intensive. We would assign every division an area to clean, sharing the workload among the entire crew, not just a fraction of the divisions. The same method was employed when preparing the engineering spaces for inspections. Extremely dirty due to the numerous pipes, liquids and operating equipment, these spaces required a lot of manpower for

¹¹ Ibid. 270, 272.

¹² Krzyzewski, Mike, *Leading from the Heart* (New York, NY: Warner Business Books, 2000), 189.

the requisite deep cleaning prior to an inspection. When we received high marks for space cleanliness, the entire crew could take pride in the achievement.

Likewise, I did not want my crew thinking they were above helping out our fellow ships in the squadron. While there was rivalry and competition between all ships in the squadron, I did not want that competition to devolve into an unwillingness to share our resources with our squadron-mates. When the request came, I made it a priority to support our sister ships in any way we could. We provided parts, manpower, technical expertise and anything else that would lead to the other ship's success. Our crew's tongue-in-cheek mantra became, "Hi, I'm from Crew EXULTANT and I'm here to help!" A sense of pride began to develop as we shared what we had with other ships. Our confidence climbed and we developed a reputation as a crew that was a team player and could be counted on. This attitude fed the mindset that teamwork was how we did business.

Tell the Truth

If you don't have trust in a relationship, that relationship is ineffective. As a leader, your life is defined by relationships. You have a relationship with your organization, your peers, your leadership team and your boss. The absence of trust in each of those relationships results in disunity.

When you are the leader, telling the truth is important because it forms the foundation for an ethical command climate. Additionally, it allows you to set and maintain a standard within your organization. Honesty in your words and actions are paramount if you are to have a well functioning team.

Trust is the basis upon which everything in your organization is built as trust is “essential to teamwork and mission accomplishment.¹³” Building trust amongst your followers can lead to an ethical culture and effective command climate. On a higher level, cultivating and establishing an ethical culture “strengthens the social trustee bond between the Nation and the military.¹⁴” Leaders have a critical role in forming an ethical climate. Leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior by being honest and telling the truth will positively impact followers.¹⁵ For an organization to be one of high morals and ethical standards, the leader must be the cornerstone of ethical behavior.

Another aspect of telling the truth is the effect it has on standards within an organization. To walk past a mistake is condone that action (or inaction). “Tolerance of little mistakes and oversights creates an environment that will tolerate bigger and ultimately catastrophic mistakes.¹⁶” If the leader is not enforcing the standards, then those at lower echelons cannot be counted on to enforce standards. A culture of honest reporting and adherence to standards may be damaging to egos, but it can translate to teamwork, cohesion and discipline.¹⁷

While in command, I knew my crew was listening to everything I said, no matter how insignificant I thought my comments were. At any point, if I were to go against what I had said earlier, I knew I would be whittling away at any trust I had worked hard to build. Sailors are not dumb. They know when you are being honest and forthcoming with them. If you are not being

¹³ *FM 6-22*, 4-14.

¹⁴ Anderson, Erik N., “Ethics and the Armed Forces Leader” reprinted in US Army Command and General Staff College *L100 Book of Readings* (Fort Leavenworth: USACGSC, August 2011), 184.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 186.

¹⁶ Powell, *It Worked for Me*, 91.

¹⁷ *FM 6-22*, 7-10 & 8-6.

honest, they will know it. Whether discussing the ship's schedule or the results of an inspection, I was always honest with my crew. And when I said I would do something, I did it. That way, there was never any doubt as to whether or not I could be trusted. My crew also knew what the standard was and what I expected from them. I endeavored to provide honest feedback in my counseling sessions and performance evaluations. If I was walking around the ship and saw a mistake, I made sure not only it was corrected, but I told the chain of command about the mistake. My honesty allowed me to foster an environment of trust and teamwork and no matter how unpopular my decisions, my crew trusted that I was making the best decisions.

These lessons are direct and simple. They are so simple, in fact, every toddler learns these lessons. The challenge lies in implementing these lessons when you are in a position of leadership. Over the past several years, Navy Commanding Officers have been relieved more for a lack of ethical or professional behavior than tactical or technical competence.¹⁸ Clearly, following these modest rules is not only essential but to ignore them is to jeopardize your position and your organization. Leadership is a difficult business with incredible stressors and pressures; adhering to these easy to understand leadership tenants requires meaningful effort. If you are able to master these rules, however, you will find yourself with leading a motivated and dedicated organization poised for success.

¹⁸ Anderson, "Ethics and the Armed Forces Leader," 174.

Statement of Originality

I swear that the work submitted is original and the product of my own efforts. No help was given in writing this essay. All material used in writing this essay has been referenced by the use of footnotes.

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