

MY WORD AS AN OFFICER IS MY BOND

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The intent of my essay is to examine a key transformational event that changed the way that I view my leadership style as an officer in the Connecticut Army National Guard (CTARNG). I have chosen to elaborate on my experience utilizing (Field Manual) FM 6-22, Army Leadership. Chapter 2, Foundations of Army Leadership depicts “The Leadership Requirements Model” (LRM). The LRM lists the essential qualities of a leader; it is the basis for my description of an event which took in 2006 when I was promoted to the rank of Major and assumed the position as Detachment Commander of the Training Site Command in Niantic, CT. As the new Commander I began my assessment of the unit in order to develop the vision for my Command. While attending a training meeting I was informed about a situation involving a particular soldier; a member of the Training Site prior to my assumption of command. He had been Absent Without Leave (AWOL) from drill for over nine pay periods and the long knives were out to process this soldier for discharge. To me, the new guy the story was incomplete, some key actions and information were either absent or had not been explored. I decided make this issue the one that would define my leadership and vision for the organization. I took up the case and began a personal investigation of the issues surrounding this situation. My intent is to explain first what a leader of character does by exhibiting the quality of empathy, giving me the ability to understand the plight of soldiers in the difficult situation of one man against the system. Second, my having the intellectual capacity through the use of interpersonal tact to reach out to soldiers and my superior to obtain the rest of the story and once fully informed utilize sound judgment to make the correct decisions regarding the needs of this soldier and the organization’s desire to retain quality personnel. And third my understanding in realizing that organizational responsibility means developing self and others to become the Non-Commissioned Officers by building our critical team skills and processes needed to lead the CTARNG into the future.

As an officer in the CTARNG with over twenty years experience I have developed the ability to empathize with the soldiers I lead. I was the new incoming Detachment Commander and the soldier had been Absent Without Leave (AWOL) from the unit. CTARNG policy says that if a soldier is absent from

weekend drills for nine consecutive pay periods he should be processed for immediate discharge. Since I was the new Commander it fell on me to either follow the standard protocol and discharge the soldier or investigate the matter. What I heard from the outgoing Commander and Retention NCO were only reasons why I should continue the process and kick this soldier out. One thing that struck me was specifically, that the current Chain of Command had done little to assist the soldier with his problems and get him back in a drilling status. I heard only excuses on how they had sent letters and tried to call him, but as we all know not every soldier responds to those standard practices. This method works for some but there are the further steps of personally visiting the soldier at his residence and lastly at his place of employment. My motto is I cannot judge another soldier unless I walk a mile in his/her shoes, so based upon my assessment of the climate of the unit I came to the conclusion that yes this soldier had made several critical mistakes but on the other hand the leadership of the unit had made mistakes and since wiped their hands clean. In their collective minds it was easier to discharge the soldier. I on the other hand put myself in his place and tried to look from another perspective which was an eye opening as a leader. This allowed me to put his needs above my own and make the personal sacrifice to do whatever it takes to bring this soldier back into the unit. I believe they thought I would fail but my plan was to utilize my interpersonal skills to approach the soldier first then my superior and lastly I would build a team or coalition of experienced NCOs to assist me.

My interpersonal tact skills were critical in several ways, firstly by reaching out to this soldier to inquire about his previous history and what I as the new Commander could do to bring him back to drilling status. When I initially made contact he was skeptical of me and my intent but I convinced him during nearly an hour of initial conversation where I was coming from and what by working as team we needed to do to get him back as a performing member of the organization. He explained to me what had happened and I went to my boss, the Training Site Commander. Second, interpersonal skills are critical in my willingness to take the risk and approach my superior officer. This is an example of interpersonal tact on the other end of the spectrum especially since at first he was dead set against the idea of taking

him back based on his recollections, but I kept insisting that we should give him another chance. Finally, the Commander said to me, "MAJ Mclean if we take him back he will be your team's problem not the unit and there is a good chance he will repeat this behavior." I said, "Sir, I am fully aware of the risk and I will have him drill on my weekend." So together we decided that if this soldier was to return he must be reduced in rank and complete his individual soldier tasks (APFT, Weapons Qual.), and he must attend all upcoming Unit Training Assemblies (UTA). Additionally, with some skillful interpersonal tact I was able to get the Command Sergeant Major on my team as well as another Master Sergeant, and my Detachment First Sergeant to assist me in this plan.

The soldier lived in my town so I asked him if he could possibly come over to my house and discuss the situation and the expected reintegration process. Since we had planned to reduce him in rank I took it upon myself to purchase Private First Class (PFC) rank. He arrived at my house and we went downstairs to discuss the matter. I explained to him that he would be required to complete the three previously listed requirements and in addition I as the Detachment Commander must reduce his rank to PFC to maintain good order and discipline in the unit. He took some time to decide but in the course of our conversation he agreed to comply with the requirements and return to the unit. I brought out the PFC rank and presented it to him giving my word as the Commander that upon the completion of all his individual tasks and full drilling participation for six months I would submit a DA Form 4187, Request for Personnel Actions to promote him back to the rank of Specialist.

The soldier, with the assistance of the Detachment First Sergeant and I, was able to complete all the requirements placed on him. Upon completion of the prescribed requirements and time as promised, I submitted the personnel action form to the Human Resources Officer. Everything with the soldier was going extremely well and entering the Annual Training (AT) period we had prepared him to give some skill level one classes. Meanwhile the paperwork was taking too long for his promotion, so I visited human resources and they informed me that the Training Site Commander had put a hold on the paperwork. I immediately approached my superior officer. Upon meeting with him there was an intense

conversation I had to remind my superior of the requirements we had agreed upon in a previous conversation, in the end my argument won the day and he signed the form to for the promotion.

Prior to the AT the NCOs and I saw the potential for this soldier to lead other soldiers. The Detachment First Sergeant and I began speaking to him about this possibility during AT and when taught the classes to his fellow soldiers that first spark of leadership was lit. After AT, our mission was to send the soldier to the Warrior Leader Course (WLC). At first he could not envision himself as a Sergeant leading others and making decisions. He possesses strong character and is a responsible family man with two young boys. Myself and the First Sergeant as senior accepted the task of developing others as leaders for the good of the organization by counseling, coaching and mentoring the junior personnel who will become the organizations future leaders. He attended and successfully completed WLC and was promoted to the rank of Sergeant and currently serves in an Engineer Company as a Team Leader.

In my essay I have discussed my crucible experience as the Detachment Commander of the Training Site in Niantic, CT back in 2006. My essay examined three essential qualities of leadership using the Leadership Requirements Model (LRM) found in FM 6-22. They are empathy for soldiers, interpersonal tact, along with the continuous development of self and others. I discussed the need for leaders to exhibit empathy, as I did with this soldier, by placing themselves in his shoes. My second point emphasized the criticality of interpersonal tact when dealing with subordinates, peers, and superiors. The key in any situation is to know your audience and be mindful how you confront potentially serious situations. The third point I discussed is importance of organizational leaders to understand the need for leaders at every level to develop themselves and others to unlock that potential waiting in every soldier by using the vehicles of counseling, coaching and mentoring subordinates and peers. In my case the ability of the soldier to assume the mantle of leadership is truly extraordinary. I firmly believe that I have grown from this crucible experience as an officer, a leader, and this situation will better enable me command at the organizational level by capitalizing on that oldest of military maxims, "An Officers word is his bond!"