

L200 Essay - Crucible Experience

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The purpose of this essay is to identify, describe, and justify a crucible experience from my life; discuss how that experience influenced my personal leadership style, beliefs, philosophy, or behaviors; and explain how it will influence me as an organizational leader. To lay the ground work to do this, I believe it is important to first define what a crucible experience actually is. According to Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, in their article titled *Crucibles of Leadership*, a crucible is defined as:

“A transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity.”¹

Based on this very broad definition, I discovered that it was difficult to identify just one particular experience that had a profound impact on my sense of identity. Over the course of my forty four years on this earth, half of that serving our great Nation, I have experienced many opportunities to grow as a person and as a leader. For this paper, I chose to use an experience from when I was a newly promoted Corporal and Infantry Mortar squad leader in the Salute Guns Platoon of the 3rd US Infantry Regiment, “The Old Guard”, back in 1990.

During a a standard monthly counseling session with my immediate supervisor, a Staff Sergeant that will remain nameless in the event my essay is ever published, I received some advice that had such a profound impact on me that I decided to leave the Active Duty Army at the end of my first term of service, join the National Guard, and attend college. He counseled me that if I wanted to be a strong leader in the Army, I must always put the Army first. The mission must always come before my family, even if it meant I would lose them. His advice challenged my paradigm of: God, family, country. This caused me to take a deep look at what kind of man I wanted to be remembered as at the end of my life. Would an Army career bring me fulfillment? If I stayed in the Army, and listened to his advice, would my family still be there

¹ Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009), 411.

at the end of an Army career? Was this Staff Sergeant the type of leader I wanted to emulate? Did I really need to sacrifice my family to serve my country? Was his advice sound? I identify these questions as the recognizable beginning to my lifelong journey to become an effective leader, not just in the Military; but also as a father, a husband, a son, and as a man in general. I say this because I believe that an effective leader at work must also be an effective leader at home in order to lead by example in all areas of life. In the process of refining and answering those questions, I discovered what I believe are the basic tenants of an over-all effective leader in life; at the individual level, as well as the organizational level.

To answer the first question; yes, an Army career is my chosen profession, and it has continuously brought me a sense of accomplishment and purpose. I discovered while I was a member of the Kansas Army National Guard and working for Xerox Business Services as my full-time employment, that there was a big difference between being a manager in the corporate world and being a leader in the Military. Army leaders are taught to lead by example, to lead from the front, and to care for the Soldiers under their command as if they were their own family. That mindset is very different from corporate leadership. Business managers and supervisors in the civilian work place only care that their employees show up on-time and do their work, what they do off the clock is of no concern. Army leaders must know every possible detail about their Soldier's lives. A Soldier's family is as important as the Soldier him / herself and Army leaders must be much more empathetic to the whole situation a Soldier is facing than the civilian supervisor is of an employee. So, part of what that Staff Sergeant was trying to say is true. In the Army it is mission first and Soldiers always, but an effective leader must find a balance between serving as a leader in the Army and serving as a leader of his own family. Yes, sometimes the mission requires my full attention and my family must wait. That is why it is important to be an effective leader at home when I am there. Just as it is my duty to mentor and grow young leaders in the Army to carry on the mission in my absence, I must also mentor my family to carry on when the Army requires me to be absent from home. I see leadership as

fulfilling God's will for my life, and that is all encompassing in every aspect of life. Just as a father must teach his children to become leaders so they can become successful in their lives, a leader in the Army must teach his subordinates, as well as his peers and supervisors how to be effective leaders. I feel that is the true purpose of leadership; to grow and develop more leaders. After nearly a decade in the civilian work force, I applied to return to the Army because I missed the Army way of life. I was disappointed in uncaring management I had experienced in the civilian work force and missed the true leadership I had experienced in the Army. The only caveat was that I had to ensure I maintained balance between my spiritual, personal, and professional life.

To answer the next question; it depends, whether my family would still be there at the end of a successful Army career was really not completely within my power to control. As it turned out, I lost my family anyway. I discovered the hard reality that if a Soldier's family does not share the same commitment to serving our great country, they probably do not share a common bond in other areas of life either. I have been able to counsel many of my Soldiers, and even some peers to carefully consider things before they throw away their career because they are afraid their spouse will leave them if they stay in the Army. Almost every time I have seen a Soldier get out of the Army to save their marriage, the marriage ends anyway. I am not sure this experience is universal, but I see serving in the Military as a family affair, that is why it is imperative that Army leaders engage on a more personal level than civilian supervisors do. Military family members must be willing to sacrifice just as much as their Soldiers do. A few years ago, I learned from a fellow Old Guard member that the Staff Sergeant that advised me that I must put the Army before my family also lost his family to divorce a few months after I ETSed. Apparently, his commitment level was higher than his spouse's. I have learned the importance of achieving balance at work and home, and the importance of mentoring my Soldiers to do the same. In the Army, there is not a clear cut delineation between a Soldier's personal life and professional service. Learning how to find a balance in my own life has given me the empathy to

understand why it is important to help fellow Soldiers to find that same balance. I now understand that all leaders must remain cognizant of the importance of maintaining balance in life when leading Soldiers from the one-on-one level all the way up to the largest of organizational levels.

In answering the third question, I discovered the real crucible of my leadership experience. I have met all kinds of leaders during my life; some are worthy of emulation, some only serve as an example of what not to do. The lesson I learned from that Staff Sergeant was to have patience and be more tolerant of those hard charging leaders who are so narrowly focused on the mission at hand, they overlook the big picture. The Army is not just about accomplishing the mission, we have a responsibility to also ensure the well-being of our Soldiers and their families under our care at the same time. In the Army; it is not mission or family, it is mission and family. This delicate balancing act of accomplishing the mission while taking care of Soldiers is what sets Army leaders apart from civilian supervisors. I firmly believe that if the Army were to be defined as a business, with an end product, the final product would be: leadership. Everything the Army does is tied together and driven by leadership. A truly effective leader mentors new leadership to work themselves out of a job so they can move on to positions of greater responsibility. This is totally different from civilian management positions where people are afraid to teach someone else how to do their job because they could possibly lose their job when it is discovered that someone else can do it just as well. Leaders who forget to account for Soldier's families because they are overwhelmed with the responsibilities of the mission, may be looked upon as toxic leaders and bring the morale of the entire unit to its knees. In garrison, I have learned the importance of including family social events and Soldier family time into the unit training calendar to ensure those events do not get counted as white space and postponed when a last minute training idea comes up. Even at the highest organizational level of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Army, the importance of taking care of Army families is at the top of the priority list.

In conclusion, this essay has covered at least three leadership topics, concepts, or issues that we have discussed during our leadership lessons this year. According to the L101 lesson on developing organizations and leaders, paragraph 11-3 of Field Manual 6-22 states that: “Successful organizational leadership tends to build on direct leader experiences. The modern organizational level leader must carefully extend his influence beyond the traditional chain of command by balancing his role of warrior with that of a diplomat in uniform.”² Balancing mission and family can seem like a diplomatic task much of the time. In lesson L109 we learned that: “The Army is people; its readiness to fight depends upon the readiness of its people (Soldiers and their families), individually and as units. We improve our readiness and foster a ready state of mind by training, motivating and supporting our people, and by giving them a sense of participation in the Army’s important endeavors.”³ This statement was made by former Army Chief of Staff Creighton Abrams, which goes to show that no matter how high up the chain we go, taking care of Soldiers and their families is always important. The key take away I learned from lesson L112, Organizational Leadership Philosophy, was: “Competent and confident leaders seek input and improvements over the entire span of their careers.”⁴ Becoming a leader in life is an ongoing process, no matter how big the organizational responsibility.

² Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009), 42.

³ Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009), 351.

⁴ Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, L100: Developing Organizations and Leaders (Fort Leavenworth, KS: USACGSC, August 2009), 422.