

Leadership, Leader and Command Philosophies: What's the Difference, Why Does It Matter?

by Dr. Ted A. Thomas and LTC Gregg M. Haley

We each have a leadership philosophy, whether it is written down or not. Taking time to reflect on who we are, what we believe, why we act the way we do and how that will affect us in future leadership positions makes us better, self-aware leaders. If we are honest with ourselves, we will identify shortcomings, strengths and gaps in our experience that shape how we will lead in upcoming positions. This introspection ensures we become the leader our organization needs, not just the leader we want to become.

There are three approaches to present personal philosophies about leading:

- Leadership philosophy;
- Leader philosophy; and
- Command philosophy.

Each of the three philosophies is personal and unique to the leader. They all contain much of the same content, yet there are important distinctions between them we need to understand. Moreover, these distinctions matter because leaders must consider their audience and the context when they begin to compose their personal philosophy on leading.

Leadership philosophy

First is *leadership* philosophy, which is the basis and foundation for the other two philosophies. Many of us are familiar with the term, but we assert that this philosophy is redefined as an internal, unpublished guide for the leader on how to lead and what his or her beliefs and priorities are when leading. This philosophy can be elaborate or simple, but it is founded on the individual's values, beliefs and past experiences. It defines and describes the ethos of the leader, regardless of the position or unit assigned, and from here is born the two subsequent philosophies.

Developing a sound leadership philosophy requires reflection and humility. Reflection is an integral part of understanding what the leader believes, why he or she believes it and how he or she plans to implement the beliefs. Humility is rarely mentioned in leadership doctrine, but without humility there is no reflection. The recognition and development of humility is often overlooked by senior leaders, especially considering how it enhances a person's value as a leader. Humility is required for self-awareness and self-honesty as the leader reflects on weaknesses and strengths. Reflection and self-awareness are necessary to determine the logic and reasoning behind the leader's beliefs and individual behaviors.

All leaders should consider reflecting on and rewriting this "living" philosophy during transitions in their careers. The reflection and mental work required to write a philosophy will improve self-awareness. The act of writing also makes a better leader by forcing refinement of his or her thoughts to help make ideas stick in the leader's sub-consciousness. The thought that must go into writing helps organize and articulate thinking, priorities and goals. It helps the leader understand what is important and how to best communicate it to others. Once leaders complete writing their personal philosophy, they will have a better idea of who they are, and why they believe and think the way they do. They can then decide what part of their philosophy they want to share with others.

The next two philosophies are for external consumption. These philosophies are published so others can read and process the information. They become a guide for an organization's members to understand their leader and how he or she operates. However, anything more than two pages is too long because, beyond that point, members of the organization will neither read it nor retain it.

Leader philosophy

The second approach is a **leader** philosophy that operationalizes the individual's leadership philosophy to his or her current supervisory role. It tells the organization's members what they need to know about their leader and what they can anticipate from him or her. This helps set expectations. For example, is the leader a detail person or a big-picture person? Does he or she like to empower or control? It uses the leadership philosophy as a basis and foundation, but it is tailored to a particular audience (unit or organization) based on the leader's position, environment, organizational culture and followers.

Since all leaders work for a commander or other senior leader, their philosophy should nest with their commander's command philosophy. Just because the leader philosophy is tailored to fit into the commander's philosophy and priorities, it does not mean those philosophies are the same, nor should they be since each leader is unique in the way he or she leads.

For instance, an operations officer may be very detailed, wanting a lot of information and conducting a couple of meetings each day to stay informed. On the other hand, a commander may be a big-picture leader who does not want the details but would rather be notified only of significant events. The commander may want everyone to go home at a certain time of day, while the operations officer would like to keep people working late into the evening when needed.

The philosophies should not conflict or cause contention within the command. Obviously, the junior leader should then find other ways of meeting requirements and bend his or her guidance to subordinates to accommodate the senior leader's directives.

Command philosophy

The last approach is a **command** philosophy, which operationalizes the leadership philosophy and applies it to the commander's unit. We are more familiar with command philosophies since most commanders post them for Soldiers to read. However, the command philosophy is just a particular application of a leader's philosophical approach to leading for a specific position and place in time. It contains what the commander wants his or her command to do or not do, how to perform and how to act. It contains the commander's vision for the unit and how to achieve it. It provides a forum for the commander to help motivate the unit, and it sets a climate for his or her particular style of command leadership to flourish.

In other words, command philosophy provides a more holistic view of how to accomplish the mission, to get all of the various parts of the organization to work together and thrive, and to safeguard the welfare of the people in the unit or organization.

We believe researching and drafting the leader or command philosophy should be near complete before the leader's arrival in an organization. However, before publishing a leader or command philosophy, the incoming leader should conduct an initial assessment, nest it with the higher headquarters as appropriate and then obtain feedback. Obtaining this feedback from trusted individuals, whether peers or mentors, may give the leader a litmus test for success before execution or publication of the philosophy. These individuals are normally able to tell whether the leader's philosophy is genuine and can provide insight on the clarity of the content, length and design.

The main difference between a leader philosophy and a command philosophy is the scope. The command philosophy provides the commander's vision for the unit, while the leader philosophy targets a section's mission and reinforces the commander's vision and priorities. In both philosophies, the leader or commander communicates the standards he or she wants the unit to meet, what expectations there are and what is important. However, the commander is responsible for everything the organization does or does not do, while the leaders under the commander are responsible for just their own section and have a much narrower focus. As the saying goes, they should "survey large fields, cultivate small ones."

One caution is that the more specific the command philosophy gets, the more commanders may take away the initiative of those they lead. A second caution is that leaders may come into an organization with preconceived notions on how they are going to operate, which can quickly become outdated or unachievable. The overall philosophy may not need to change, but the approach may have to adjust. For instance, there are different needs and approaches when commanding a unit with civilian and military

personnel, as compared to a unit with only military. Commanders need to modify their philosophy to their current organization while still being true to themselves.

'Living' documents

All three written philosophies need to be living documents that should be revisited continually. The leadership philosophy can be more conceptual, while the leader and command philosophies need to be more practical and application-oriented.

The leader and command philosophies also need to stay aligned with organizational policies, core values and higher-command directives. These two philosophies are public documents the leader wants subordinates to read. Since they are public documents, this underscores the need for leaders to be as honest as possible with themselves in their reflection and to live what they say. Otherwise, the organization will quickly see through the hypocrisy and hollow words. The leadership philosophy is kept as personal and private as the leader desires but is still the foundation for the other two.

As leaders rise in rank, change positions of responsibility and grow in knowledge and understanding of people and leadership, it is natural for their ideas and philosophy of leadership to evolve. Leaders should not be static. Instead, they need to constantly learn and grow from their experiences. Therefore, they should revisit their leadership philosophy throughout their careers by reflecting on experiences and knowledge gained, and then capture those lessons-learned by improving and updating their leadership philosophy. There may not be any major revisions, but certainly there will be some added emphasis or insight due to life experiences and gained leadership experience. In addition, each time leaders change jobs or bosses, they should revise their leader or command philosophy based on the new requirements and environment.

Building trust, respect, confidence

The importance of writing these philosophies is to let subordinates know what their leader expects from them, as well as what they can expect from their leader. By letting subordinates know the leader's priorities, and how he or she thinks and acts, the leader will help build trust and respect within the command and build confidence among his or her subordinates.

The written philosophies provide a focus and intent for subordinates when questions arise and the leader is not there to answer them. It also forces leaders to spend some time in self-reflection to understand how they want to lead and operate and how to communicate that to their subordinates. While we believe it is important to provide these in written form, it cannot be understated that these documents provide little value to an organization without the proper modeling of their contents early and often by the leader.

It is well documented and oft quoted that LTG George S. Patton Jr. developed his leadership philosophy and refined it throughout his career based on the position and duties he had at any given time. However, his core principles always remained intact:

- Physical fitness;
- Positive mental outlook;
- Expert in his profession;
- Led by example;
- Went for the jugular (in it to win it; no second-place trophies);
- Audacious;
- Knew his competition/enemy; and
- Selected and cultivated loyal, capable subordinates.

There is no doubt Patton lived these principles in everything he did. His actions are well documented, and these principles can be seen in almost all of them. Patton was an advocate and practitioner of the formula "promulgation of the order should take no more than 10 percent of the time, while the remaining 90 percent [of the time should] consist of personal supervision coupled with proper and vigorous execution."¹ Patton was able to make this formula work due to the embodiment of his personal

leadership principles into who he was, and the effective and impactful conveyance of these same principles to his subordinates.

Conclusions

The written leadership, leader and command philosophies are internal and external guides. They provide a beacon to refocus leadership efforts when stress and mission demands cause the leader to lose focus. As has been often said, “if everything is important then nothing is important.” Therefore, once written down, these philosophies become important tools for many aspects of the leader’s life, in or out of the military, through leading families, communities and organizations. These philosophies will become a part of how leaders set their initial foundation in the unit, how they will be remembered and what their legacy will be.

Dr. Ted Thomas, a retired lieutenant colonel, is the director of the Department of Command and Leadership (DCL), Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Fort Leavenworth, KS. Dr. Thomas graduated from the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) in 1978 and served 20 years in various command and staff positions – including battalion S-3 and executive officer of 307th Engineer Battalion; assistant division engineer, 82nd Airborne Division; and commander, Readiness Group, Fort Leonard Wood, MO – before retiring as commander of 554th Engineer Battalion. Dr. Thomas taught at USMA as assistant professor and course director. He holds a master’s of science degree in civil engineering from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and a doctorate degree in engineering management from Missouri University of Science and Technology. He joined the faculty at CGSC in 2005 and has served as the director of the department since 2007.

LTC Gregg Haley is a leadership instructor, DCL, CGSC, Fort Leavenworth. His previous assignments include commander, 3rd Squadron, 89th Cavalry Regiment, Fort Polk, LA, and Operation Freedom Sentinel in Afghanistan; tactics instructor, Department of Tactics, CGSC; brigade operations officer, 170th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Baumholder, Germany; and commander, battalion executive officer and battalion operations officer, 4th Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, Baumholder, and Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan. His military education includes the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officer’s Course. LTC Haley holds a bachelor’s of science degree in political science/international relations from the University of Missouri and a master’s of arts degree in leadership and management from Webster University.

Notes

¹ Richard Stillman, *General Patton’s Timeless Leadership Principles*, Richard J. Stillman Publishing Company, 1998.

Acronym Quick-Scan

CGSC – Command and General Staff College

DCL – Department of Command and Leadership

USMA – U.S. Military Academy