

ASSESSING LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVELY: *GET IT RIGHT, EVERY TIME*

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“If you look at readiness, if you look at combat power, the most important element of that is not technology. It’s not the guns, the planes, the ships. It’s not the weapons. It’s not the computers. It’s the people, and most importantly, it’s the leaders.”

— GEN Mark A. Milley¹
Army Chief of Staff

Assessing leadership is one of the most important missions leaders have in the Army today. Unfortunately, it is often taken for granted. The pace at which the Army is conducting current operations, coupled with downsizing, often contributes to short-sided assessments of leaders. With minimum effort, supervisors quickly make result-oriented assessments of subordinate leaders and their ability to accomplish missions. It’s easy to assess how subordinate leaders work well with others or act as a member of a team. In a results-oriented environment, it’s easy to see productive leaders and assess them accordingly. However, if we stop there, a third and critical perspective is overlooked — the subordinates’ perspective of their leader. Because obtaining this perspective/input often takes more time and investment, it is often left out. The subordinate perspective is where leadership lives and breathes, where a leader’s passion resonates and inspiration either thrives or is non-existent. Without this critical portion of the Leadership Assessment Triad (see Figure 1), leaders often incorrectly assess subordinate leaders and perhaps accelerate careers prematurely. A leader’s subordinates are where bad leadership develops and thrives unnoticed if not checked and corrected. This can lead to disastrous results with the advancement of the very leaders the Army seeks to remove. In addition, poor leadership tends to leave “bodies in its wake” and hemorrhages talent that our Army will need in the future. Far too many good leaders submit their request for unqualified resignation or depart the service early due to poor leadership.

A Theory on Assessments

Leaders develop both good and bad habits. In our profession, the Profession of Arms, we must hone leaders’ good habits while helping them cast away the bad. If not done early on, bad habits can define a leader’s style and character over time. Unfortunately, leaders are less likely to change the more experienced and senior they become. For example, lieutenants are moldable and can be shaped, even with significant course corrections. Captains are

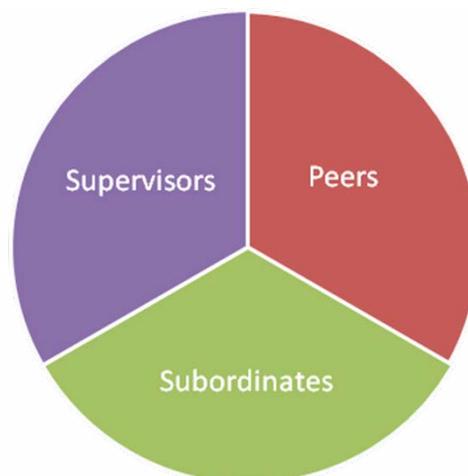


Figure 1 — The Leader Assessment Triad

(To accurately assess a leader, you must have input from all three elements)

also still shapeable as they develop their leadership style, and majors start to become set in their ways but can still be influenced/developed. However, by the time officers are lieutenant colonels, they are fairly set with their leadership style — good or bad. This applies to the NCO corps, civilian work force, and any organization with leaders. It is much easier early on to get those that deviate from the path of good leadership back on the path. However, as time goes on, rank increases and the divide increases — meaning it’s much harder to get back on the right path after years of reinforcement (see Figure 2).

Why the Triad is Important

Bill Hybels, founder of the annual international Global Leadership Summit, has a mantra: “Everyone wins when a leader gets better.”² Investing in the development and accurate assessment of leaders is critical to success of the Army. As the Army continues to get smaller, the world continues to grow in complexity. As our nation’s landpower force, the tasks the Army will be asked to do require exceptional leadership by leaders that are well developed, trained, and tested. The complexities of land warfare require our best leaders; we cannot afford to get this wrong. There is too much at stake. Our nation needs passionate leaders that embrace mission command, can inspire and build teams to accomplish the mission, develop subordinates by empowering and trusting them, can learn and accept critical feedback, and be a good team player. The Army needs leaders that are solid in moral character. All of these traits are not necessarily observable from the superior’s view. Leaders must utilize all aspects of the Leader Assessment Triad. If we don’t, we are taking unnecessary risk. If character is truly more important than competence, we must access those perspectives of the led. It is important to find out how leaders act and operate when the boss is not around!

Often we miss this vital input, and it results in the advancement of potentially toxic leaders who crush subordinates and do not exemplify the leaders we need. As we have seen over the years, if poor leadership goes uncorrected at lower ranks, it will most likely surface at the colonel or general-officer level when leaders are more visible and under more scrutiny. When poor character surfaces, it is often scandalous and reflects poorly on the Army, but it is preventable if assessed and corrected early in a leader’s development. We must make a habit early of considering the input from peers and subordinates when assessing leaders at every level — but how?

Peers. There is no doubt that your assessment as a leader’s superior carries a lot of weight, but it’s limited only to what you can see — often of what the subordinate leader wants you to see. Peers may assist in confirming or denying the accuracy of your assessment. Through routine counseling, leaders can easily see how leaders rate them among their peers. You can often see trends or friction as peer leaders discuss their peers and where they rank them. This can help confirm or deny your assessment. Another source of feedback can come from chaplains who can provide a sense of the climate in a company, battalion, or brigade without mentioning their sources or breaking their bond of trust with the Soldiers.

Subordinates. Renowned author and speaker on leadership John C. Maxwell states that the core of leadership — what’s essential — is that leaders add value to people.³ Where else can that be visible but through the eyes of

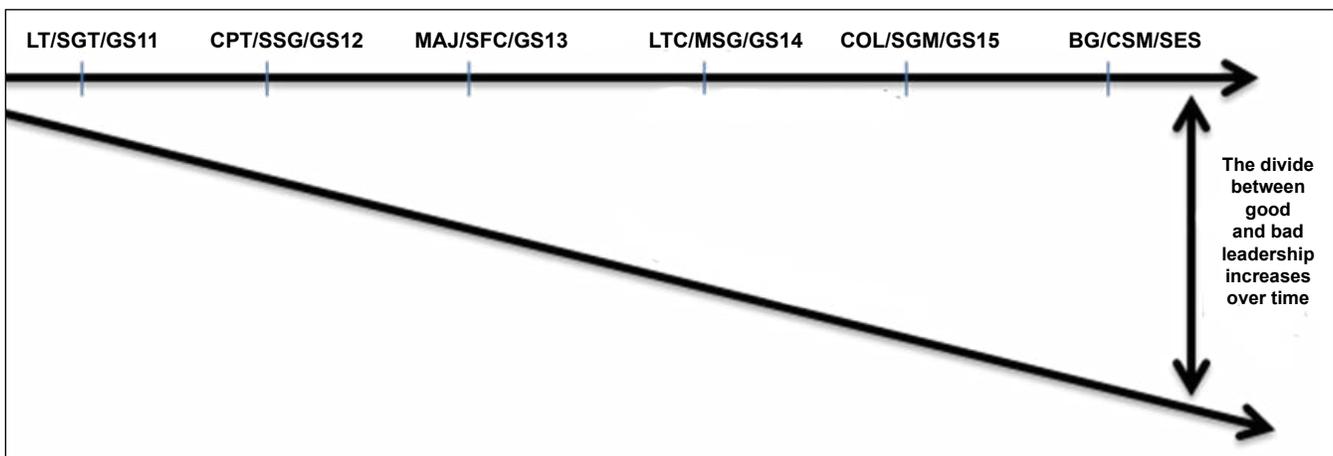


Figure 2 — Leadership Paths

(Poor leadership not corrected over time is reinforced by promotion, thus harder to change the more senior the leader)

their subordinates. Getting feedback on leaders does not mean one has to develop a “spy ring” or sneak around to try to catch a glimpse of leaders when they are unaware. That can build distrust and an unhealthy environment. But leaders do need to invest the time and effort to see the complete leader, not just a portion. There are many techniques for getting this critical feedback/assessment, and none require a leader to undermine the trust of a healthy environment.

Command Climate Surveys. Commanders at every level are required to conduct Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) surveys within 90 days of assuming command and at six and 12 months of command. Commanders are required to share the findings with their superiors. These surveys can also be modified to include questions and concerns leaders may have about the command climate in addition to the equal opportunity-focused questions. The surveys often provide leaders another look inside a subordinate leader’s unit in order to assess the morale and perception of the leadership. There may be some anomalies or some outlier comments, but generally the surveys can give good insight on subordinates’ perceptions of their leaders. Again, these surveys can help confirm or deny your assessment.

Get out of your office! Visiting a subordinate unit’s training is vital to assess much about a unit. Even better, seeing the unit in action without its leader is a great opportunity to see mission command in action. Talking with Soldiers to see how they are doing will often uncover issues or provide indicators of great or poor leadership (a first sergeant or command sergeant major are great sources on leader’s performance). Talking with the a unit’s NCOs — sergeant through command sergeant major — often brings out the improprieties in a unit without much digging. Unit leaders reflect the passion of their top leader, and inspiration will be evident — the same is true if it is not.

Conduct physical training (PT) with subordinate units. This can be very revealing — you would be amazed at what you can find out about the climate. PT sessions are also a great opportunity to conduct impromptu sensing sessions and talk to unit leaders. If there are issues or concerns, they will surface. Company commanders through division commanders will see the benefits of this.

Counseling. It should be the case that a senior rater counsels the subordinates of the rater being assessed (i.e., brigade commander counseling company commanders). It is important not to break the trust of these counseling sessions, but if there is a problem that you are not aware of, they must be able to trust you with the information that could endanger their relationship with their boss. This is not a “kiss and tell” counseling session, but during performance counseling it can be very easy to confirm or deny your assessments of their boss with subtle questioning. Subordinates must know that their loyalty should be to the “U.S. Army” nametape on their uniform before anyone else’s. If you put the Army first, you will never be wrong.

Tough, stressful, realistic training. Leaders must be trained properly and put to the test. That is how we certify leaders; that is how we develop. Through crucibles and adversity, we see the mettle that leaders are made of and often see their true colors shine through. External assessments or other leader’s assessments of the subordinate leaders can help confirm or deny your assessment as well. “Fall-out one” drills in training where Soldiers move up a level in the absence of their leader are great ways to see leaders under stress. “Mangoday” events where small units made up of leaders of the same rank have to organize and accomplish a mission under high stress are great crucibles to assess leaders from all three perspectives of the Leadership Assessment Triad. These are just a few examples of how leaders can get after seeing subordinate leaders from the subordinates’ point of view.

Conclusion

Excluding the subordinate view eliminates the ability to truly assess leadership and see how a leader leads when the boss is not around. Too many times, leaders at all levels are fooled because they only look at one piece of the assessment pie — only using their observations as a superior. This is exactly why poor leaders who get results often progress; the bad leadership behavior is typically only observable by subordinates. Superiors see the results but not the turmoil left in their wake (for example, CPT Sobel in *Band of Brothers*).⁴ The mission command philosophy resides in a leader’s subordinates. Are they empowered and entrusted? Are they given freedom to execute within the intent? Are they thriving? It’s hard to confirm or deny from above with only one perspective. One must see the peer and subordinates’ points of view — the entire assessment triad — to accurately assess leadership.

Assessing leaders is one of the most important things we do in the Army because leadership is vital to success. It is critical to talent management. The future depends on leaders getting this right — not most of the time but all of

the time. There is no room for error. Periodically, as seen in the news, the Army is not getting it right. Supervisors cannot afford to take the risk and must incorporate all three aspects of the Leader Assessment Triad: the supervisor's, peers,' and the subordinates' assessments. Leave nothing to doubt. This must start early in a leader's career in order to develop properly and root out bad habits before they become nearly irreversible at a senior level — it's hard for a leopard to change its spots! The Army doesn't need to develop a new form or new survey to get after this; leaders just need to do their job.

SMA Daniel A. Dailey highlighted the following: "Nothing happens unless we have good leaders, so we need to continue to improve that for our Soldiers. I think we've made improvements, but there's still a lot of work that needs to be done."⁵

Supervisors at all levels must get this right. The nation is counting on the Army to develop, select, and promote adaptive leaders that can win on the battlefield of today and tomorrow. Soldiers are entitled to inspirational and passionate leadership. Leaders at all levels — officers, NCOs, and Civilians — must assess subordinates completely. Incorporating the assessment triad will assist supervisors in doing their duty and ensuring Soldiers get what they deserve — good leaders.

Notes

¹ Army Chief of Staff GEN Mark A. Milley, comments made at Norwich University during the centennial celebration of the ROTC program, 22 April 2016.

² Bill Hybels, remarks made at the Global Leadership Summit in Chicago, August 2016.

³ John C. Maxwell, *Intentional Living* (NY: Hatchett Book Group, 2015),132.

⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*, (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

⁵ SMA Daniel A. Dailey, comments made during an interview with the *Army Times*, 30 January 2015.

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