

American Leadership

Lessons Learned from the School of Hard Knocks

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Established leaders need to change their leadership behaviors to incorporate the needs of a fast-moving society, a highly inclusive nation, and a renaissance of Americanism. This article is not about leadership theory. If you want to study that, take a college course. This article is about leadership lessons gleaned from the school of hard knocks — at the rubber-meets-the-road level.

Established leaders have a lot of responsibility. Their role definitely includes an obligation to teach younger, aspiring leaders how most things work “out there.” This can be done in a number of different ways, but one way that usually-generally-normally-almost-all-the-time does not work is to preach, so to speak. I think we’ve all seen a variety of leadership preachers — they come in swiftly, eyes aflame with the gospel of their truth and sporting lists of what to do and what not to do. The allure is that they are entertaining and believable. The leadership snake oil that they sell is ineffective because only you can improve your own leadership skills and authenticity. Your life lessons come from your own “leadership crucibles,” not thrust on you vicariously by others. In the Army, where there is no shortage of great expressive phrases, we used to call those preaching techniques the “swoop-and-poop” method. It just doesn’t work so well because leadership is experiential in nature. You learn by doing, correcting, refining, and practicing.

We can learn leadership by listening to the stories of others and then internalizing and comparing those lessons to our own experience set. That can be a powerful leadership learning technique. When I was a young Soldier, I can remember listening to the stories that my basic combat training commander would relate to us trainees. They were all about what worked and what didn’t work when he was in Vietnam. I never felt compelled to write down any of his or my own musings about leadership or keep a diary when I was a young Army private in 1971. My desire to write things started much later in life — after having experienced a healthy dose of leadership on both the receiving (following) end and the giving (leading) side.

I recently made a new friend — someone whom we met in front of our house this year as my wife and I were greeting the many community visitors to our Christmas display. Balbir Mathur is a kind and venerable gentleman who had the great fortune to have a small group session with the Dalai Lama. Here is Balbir’s recollection of meeting the Dalai Lama:

The central theme of the Dalai Lama’s discourse was that our world is passing through a very critical time in history. We have entered an age of shirking responsibility for our actions. This attitude has saturated our national and international leadership. We have become so focused on

the short term that we are losing the art of statesmanship. There is a growing crisis in leadership, which can lead to worldwide disaster.

Like Balbir, the U.S. Army recognized the need for multi-level effective leadership many years ago and has been cultivating it ever since. The Army provided me plenty of access to achieve learning about leadership — good leadership, bad leadership, and every variation in between. I’m a graduate of the Army’s Airborne and Ranger schools as well as professional leadership officer training at the Armed Forces Staff College and the Army War College. In those schools, I was able to cross-check my leadership style with that of others in similar roles. What kind of leader was I — rough, compassionate, delegating, empowering? The thing about military schools is that they provide you a golden opportunity to learn a lot about yourself — if you are open to finding out those types of things. I wanted to know so I listened to others’ feedback and provided them with the same.

After a full career in the Army, a business career, and now a career in education, I figured it’s time to write about leadership so that others might benefit from my learnings and stories. What better approach than to go back in history to when I first engaged the cradle of leadership prowess — the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, GA. Fort Benning is a special place for me. I used to joke that every time I went there on business it was always on the “wrong” side of post — the Ranger training area or the 44th Student Airborne Company, etc. My wife Marianne was a career Department of the Army civil servant and both her mom and dad (a chief warrant officer) are buried in the Fort Benning Post Cemetery. I’ve gladly visited that side of post to pay homage to CW4 Ira Hornbeck, a great American who served his country proudly, later going back into combat — this time fighting the cancer he contracted from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

I should start by describing my Ranger School experience. I was in Ranger Class 11-76, which took place at Camp Darby, Fort Benning during the summer of 1976. The Ranger instructors called us the “Bicentennial Rangers” as our nation was celebrating its 200th birthday on the fourth of July that year. Our class was almost all ROTC cadets preparing to enter their senior year at college upon return (should they live through the experience).

Our Ranger instructors at that time were NCOs and officers who mostly had a solid Vietnam War experience behind them. They were stellar individuals. Here are some leadership lessons I learned in Ranger School that have served me very well in my subsequent careers.



Ranger School Class 11-76

Bad habits are a choice. I quickly learned that real leadership involves shedding bad habits that we thought were acceptable and then taking on new habits that are definitely better than the ones we shed. Ranger School was a platform for shedding bad habits — procrastination, self-aggrandizement, selfishness of any kind, and needless philosophizing. I learned that I could easily survive on much less sleep and I could also eat far less and still live (wish I could re-learn that one...).

Like most of the military schools with a proud history and a lifelong certification, entrants must be “reduced” to their most basic essence so that they can be remolded in the likeness of those who went before and proved their leadership under duress. Of course, I mean all of this in a figurative sense, but the idea is a good one. The reduction/elimination process is kind of a detoxification model that then allows you to assimilate great leadership behaviors that your whole person may have rejected before.

You are your own leadership mentor. I quickly learned that once our cars were locked up in that holding yard adjacent to the Ranger training company and we reported in to the Ranger School “reception committee,” no one there gave much attention to anything other than getting on with the training. There was no one to reach out to, no phone-a-friend, or anything else — it was all them and all you. Oh, didn’t you ask to come here? Well then, what’s with the deer-in-the-headlights look? Oh, you want to write a letter to your Congressman and tell him all about the nasty things that are happening to you? Sure, sure — here’s a pen and paper.

Of course, I had to be different and showed up sporting a nice mustache. Wrong — it was quickly removed and placed in an envelope so that if I wanted it back at the end of the training I could maybe retrieve it. I was bold and in the best physical shape of my life — we all were. I felt that I could take anything on. I learned that while physical prowess and stamina were very important, inner strength, determination, and mental drive were equally important. I learned the value of respect and service to

others in Ranger School.

Serving others is what it’s all about. Ranger School is the best kept secret of learning servant leadership. We had Ranger buddies and heck, every Ranger student in my class was more or less a Ranger buddy by the time we were in the middle of this nine-week course. I distinctly recall getting into an argument with another Ranger student that degenerated quickly, probably due to the lack of sleep we constantly worked under. The Ranger instructor took us both aside and threatened to deny us both of the capability to

father any more children during our natural lives (as well as the removal of other capabilities). He made it clear that if we engaged in that behavior, it didn’t matter who was right or wrong — we both would be ejected from the school. We both listened intently and I can assure you that I learned a great lesson that day — it’s not about you. Rather, it’s about everyone else.

If only we practiced that learning every day. It’s about everyone else — those who you lead, those who you follow, and others that you come into contact with. Think about that for a second — if everyone thought and acted to serve others, someone would then be taking care of you. So spend a lot less time trying to take care of yourself and more time taking care of others. Sometimes it will backfire on you — ignore those instances; they will become fewer and fewer.

I also learned that rank is just a pay-grade level — an indicator of the type of leadership role that you could possibly assume (breadth and scope) based on your time in practice and your other experiences. The best generals and the best colonels are those that serve selflessly and promote the achievements of those who work for them. Those are the ones that understand what leadership is all about. They are great Americans who practice multi-level, powerful leadership.

I want to keep this article short; I hate reading those long, drawn out ones, don’t you? Hang on though because the best is yet to come. The next installment of the American Leadership series will be here soon and you won’t want to miss it!

Rangers lead the way!

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