

# Leadership Thoughts for the Ages

LTC (RETIRED) ED DEVOS

Old Soldiers like me still recall the leadership training we received at Fort Benning, GA, 50 years ago. And while weapons and technology concerning the prosecution of war will continue to evolve, the fundamentals of leadership taught throughout the years remain constant because basic human needs, described in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, will always remain the same. Men and women still act and react to positive leadership in predictable ways, and not surprisingly, they react to negative leadership in predictable ways as well.

Below are some leadership thoughts gleaned from my observations of both positive and negative leaders and experiences in military, business, civic, political, and church settings as well as through numerous readings of books, various magazines, and papers on the subject. These thoughts are not aimed at any one rank, but at all who have a leadership role or who aspire to have such responsibility, whether military or civilian. These comments are not meant to impugn the principles taught in the field manuals and the numerous leadership books on our book shelves. Rather, the intent of this article is to reinforce various principles with some different verbiage and some practical advice that has stood the test of time.

These thoughts are organized into five groups chosen for the mottos of selected infantry regiments where the crucible of leadership is paramount. It is my hope that these thoughts will provide some inspiration to readers as they lead the men and women of our Army.



**A platoon leader with the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division signals his platoon during a combined arms live-fire exercise at Pohakuloa Training Area, HI, on 15 May 2018.**

**(Photo by 1LT Ryan DeBooy)**



## **“We Lead the Way” — Motto of the “Pioneers” of the 29th Infantry Regiment**

**Understand the expectations of being a leader.** MG Willard Latham, commanding general of Fort Benning from August 1975 to July 1977, penned the comments below in his first week after taking command of the U.S. Army Infantry Center:

1. *Leaders are expected to lead in person. (They) are to positively and constantly energize and influence situations around their units...*
2. *All leaders are to exhibit:*
  - a. *Technical and tactical proficiency (in) all facets of (your) MOS.*
  - b. *Mental toughness. Never give up. Practice enthusiasm for the job at hand.*
  - c. *Physical fitness. Strive to reach your maximum potential. Your goal is to raise your unit’s capabilities.*
  - d. *Spiritual soundness. Be aware that your demonstrated example is the most often observed and important facet of this quality. Act accordingly.*

**Be above reproach.** Your morals and ethics should be beyond reproach. You are always on parade. Your unit will mirror your standards. You set the example in all things. Remember that the higher up the flag pole you go, the more your backside shows.

**No days off.** Your job every day is to instruct, teach, coach, lead, train, and encourage all those around you, preparing them to take your place on the line. Demonstrate continually how one in your position should act/react to the challenges thrown at you. And when you make a mistake, understand what happened and why. Then learn from it.

**You set the standard.** The morale in your unit is a direct reflection of your morale. If you face situations with a “Can Do” attitude, your unit will follow your lead. Remember, you are the chief morale officer or NCO of your unit. Understand that every word and every action you take influences the morale of your unit. If your unit’s morale is not where you would like it to be, look in the mirror. Recognize the problem. Fix it. Then learn from it and move on.

**Be real.** Subordinates want to know you as their leader cares — that you bleed, have a family, have feelings, have experienced love and hate, passion and fear. In other words, subordinates do not expect you to be super-human. But they do expect you to care for them as much as the situation allows in ways that few outside the brotherhood of arms could ever understand.

**Trust others to do their job.** When a problem occurs at a leadership position below yours, it is not your job to personally fix their problem. That is why those leaders are there. That problem is below your pay grade. You have enough to think about. If you have to take time to fix the lower-level problem, either you didn’t train them well enough or you may have the wrong leader in that position.

**Improve each day.** Every true leader “should be knowledgeable, skillful, and proficient and he must know more than his men... The leader should also learn to make quick decisions... Professional pride, confidence, integrity, loyalty, tact, endurance, discipline, and example are some of the qualities that go to make up good leadership.”  
— Major E.Y.M. Ofosu-Okyere, Army of the Republic of Ghana, from the September-October 1978 issue of *Infantry Magazine*.



### **“Unity is Strength” — Motto of the “Regulars” of the 6th Infantry Regiment**

**The golden rule.** Treat all those around you like you would like to be treated. Each Soldier is a volunteer, a valuable asset to your unit’s success. Treat each one as a unique, mature individual. But when discipline is required, discipline with love, understanding, and empathy — but discipline nevertheless.

**Treat ’em right.** A Soldier has only one family. When there is a graduation, anniversary, etc, in their family, unless we are going to war, give them a break so they can enjoy these once-in-a-lifetime events. In the years that follow, the Soldier will remember the decision you made, and it will influence their feelings about the Army forever.

**Trust flows both ways.** Trust is built over a long time, but it can be torn in two in one moment of stupidity. If others trust you, they will feel they have the freedom to speak their mind without fear. Without that trust, they will not contribute, and your unit will be the lesser for it. Surround yourself with people you trust. You want to get as many brains working as possible, not just yours. Be honest with one another. Consider also that weak leaders are easily threatened by competent subordinates, but strong leaders surround themselves with the best because they are not intimidated by able and competent followers.

**Trust the NCOs.** Our NCO corps is the backbone of our units and the envy of every other Army in the world. At the small unit level, there is the NCO way and the officer way to fix various problems. Generally, the NCO way works better at the small unit level.

**Loyalty flows both ways.** One of the soldiers who served under GEN Harold K. Johnson, Army Chief of Staff from 1964 to 1968 and an Infantryman in World War II and Korea, wrote, “He had an unusual sense of loyalty to the men under him, the kind of thing ordinary Soldiers notice and value when they grade an officer.” Wish we all could receive such high praise from those who serve with us.

**Tell ’em why.** During the Revolutionary War, Baron von Steuben learned that American Soldiers did their duty much better when they knew why they were doing it. Don’t hesitate to explain “why” you are doing something. If your Soldiers understand the why, they will be much more inclined to get the job done well. If you leave your people in the dark, you will get what you’ve asked for.

**Say thank you.** A simple “thank you,” sincerely said or written in a short hand-written note, goes a long way to cementing a trust and a bond between two people. Leaders should be especially mindful of saying “thanks” since it is everyone else in the unit who does the work.

**Think team.** It is “our” battalion. “We” and “us” are in it together for a common purpose, a common goal. The pronouns “I,” “me,” and/or “mine” have little place in a leader’s vocabulary except when things go awry. Picture General Robert E. Lee as the men from Pickett’s Charge retreated past him. Lee stood there, hat in hand, saying over and over again to his men, “It is my fault... my fault. You men did everything asked of you. It is my fault and mine alone.”

**Be organized.** When you are in the field, you are in the field — 24 hours a day. When you are not in the field, you are not in the field. In garrison, things should (and can) get done in a timely manner. Don’t waste others’ time through your inability or laziness to organize.



### **“Willing and Able” — Motto of the “Cottonbalers” of the 7th Infantry Regiment**

**Keep your eyes and ears open.** Understand the pulse of your unit. Hone the skill of situational awareness. If you think everything is running smoothly, you haven’t looked around enough or listened carefully enough. Get out from behind your desk, visit some different places in your unit, and start asking more questions. While the truth and bad news may be painful, they do not get any better with time. Get ahead of the big crises by solving the small problems while they are still small. Small infections not taken care of early become festering wounds that will sap your energy and time.

**Inspect is to emphasize.** GEN Bruce Clark said, “An organization does well only those things the boss checks. Anything that has not been inspected has been neglected. To inspect is to emphasize.” The larger the unit, the more checks must be delegated. Make sure someone is checking on your behalf. As President Ronald Reagan famously said, “Trust but verify.”

**Raise the bar.** All anyone can ask of you is to do your best. The question then is what is your best? Can your best be improved? Of course! Think about pushups. How do you increase the number of pushups you can do? You do more pushups. You devote more time and effort to reach the goal.

**Always keep your mission in the forefront of your mind.** Keep “selling” your mission and goals for your unit. Keep reminding your unit what “we” are trying to achieve and why. If you don’t have well-established goals, you will always be in the crisis management mode, and the entire unit will suffer because of it. Do things because they are the right things to do, not because someone is coming to observe or test you. Don’t paint rocks if painting them has nothing to do with your mission.

**Know yourself.** Are you patient enough to gather all the important facts before you make a decision on incomplete information? Two good military truisms to live by:

- (1) Always expect the unexpected; and
- (2) The first report in almost every crisis will be partially wrong because that first report will be missing some very important facts.

Are you so set in your ways that you have difficulty being flexible when the situation calls for it? Can you laugh at yourself when you do something stupid? More importantly, can you learn from your mistakes? And as the ups and downs of the day occur, can you keep perspective and stay focused on the important issues or will the trauma and drama of the day take you off course?

**Professionals are always learning.** Devour everything you can find that relates to military history and military leaders. As President John F. Kennedy once wrote, “Knowledge of the past prepares us for the crisis of the present and the challenge of the future.” As a minimum, Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War* and *On War* by Clausewitz should be in your library. Know the principles of war backwards and forward.

**Be the lion.** Consider this statement attributed to George Washington: “An army of asses led by a lion is vastly superior to an army of lions led by an ass.”



### **“Deeds Not Words” — Motto of the “Regulars” of the 22nd Infantry Regiment**

**Your word must be your bond.** Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Be dependable. Be the one everyone can always count on because you gave your word and everyone knows you will keep it. Make it a point to under-promise and over-deliver.

**Be a servant leader.** One of the definitions of the word “lead” is to serve. Therefore, a leader is to serve others. That is why you are the last man in your unit’s chow line to eat or the last one the medics treat with moleskin for your blisters. Those are simple messages to your unit that you care for them. We have all seen examples of where a leader has taken advantage of his/her position. What message does that send to the unit?

**Only results count.** Everyone but the Chief of Staff of the Army will miss a promotion list one day. Just because you spend every waking hour at work doesn’t mean a thing. As Benjamin Franklin said, “Never confuse motion with action.”

**Don’t waste time.** GEN Douglas MacArthur once said, “The loss of time is irretrievable in war. Every military disaster can be explained in two words: ‘Too late.’” Give orders so that they cannot be misunderstood. Show respect for others by always being on time. If you are the subordinate, 10 minutes early is being on time. Start all meetings on time and end them on time. If you have allocated 30 minutes for a meeting, live up to your word and adjourn the meeting at the 29-minute point.

**Do your best, no matter what the job.** Leaders at all levels should simply do the best job they can, wherever they are assigned, and promotions and recognition will follow. If leaders focus too much on promotions, they will very quickly turn from what is important for the unit’s benefit and concentrate on trying to make themselves look good. You are far better off thinking that there is almost no limit to what a unit or team can accomplish if it doesn’t matter who gets the credit.



### **“Frightened By No Difficulties” — Motto of the “Wolfhounds” of the 27th Infantry Regiment**

**Your first priority is your combat mission.** That combat mission is why your unit exists. Therefore, prioritize your time accordingly. Don’t waste time on things that have nothing to do with your mission. Your survival and the lives of those in your unit depend upon how well you prepare them for battle. Keep your focus there. Keep the main thing, the main thing. Your potential enemy should be approaching his mission the same way. You must use your time more wisely than your enemy is using his. In war, our goal is to win every battle 100 to 0, not 60 to 40. Bring

all your assets to bear. Beat the enemy to a pulp and then be gracious in victory.

**Take time to think.** Learn to put your feet up on the desk, lean back, and ask yourself “what if...?” This will help you get a head start when one of Murphy’s Laws raises its ugly head. A big part of your job is to think ahead and to not get caught up too much in the present. Like a good chess player, you should be thinking several moves ahead. Get inside your enemy’s decision-making cycle. Have him dance to your tune instead of the other way around.

**Encourage initiative.** Encourage those around you to use their initiative within the broad commander’s guidance you give them. Then be ready to back them up when things go a bit haywire. And when they do, when the time is right, use the positives and the negatives of what happened as a teaching opportunity for all concerned. But tread carefully. Ultimately, your goal is for your subordinates to use their initiative within the mission-type orders you issue. You do not want to stifle initiative.

**Be bold and aggressive.** A plan in combat is just that — a plan. When the bullets start flying and as you cross the line of departure, remember that a poor plan executed aggressively is better than a good plan executed by timid leaders. Boldness and aggressiveness can win the day when nothing else can. Remember Joshua Chamberlain’s bayonet charge at Gettysburg. Or as the English author Charles Dodgson said, “If you limit your actions in life to things that nobody can possibly find fault with, you will not do much.”

**Believe in your Soldiers and in yourself.** “Decide what will hurt the enemy most within the limits of your capabilities to harm him and do it. Take calculated risks. That is quite different from being rash. My personal belief is that if I have a 50-percent chance, I will take it because the superior fighting qualities of American Soldiers led by me will surely give you the extra one percent necessary.”

— Excerpts from a letter written by GEN George Patton to his son on 6 June 1944.

**Strive to be the best.** Thoughts expressed in *Profile of a Commander* by Yigal Allon, Deputy Defense Minister of Israel: “The best leader... has the qualities of a father and a youth leader, an instructor and an educator, a leader of men and a commander in battle. He must prove himself to be a man who thinks and acts, who plans and organizes, who weighs up all sides of an argument and comes to a firm, clear-cut decision.”

Finally, remember that others have seen potential in you and they assigned you to be a leader, a commander. So on those days when the responsibility weighs heavy, take heart in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, our 26th President:

*“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again... who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause... and who... if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”*

**LTC (Retired) Ed DeVos**, an Infantryman for more than 20 years, now invests the majority of his time writing thought-provoking historical narratives about Soldiers. His four books are about men who exhibit valor and integrity, courage, and honor. His first contribution to *Infantry Magazine* was an article published in 1984.