

# What Is Leadership: From the Perspective of a Command Sergeant Major

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What is leadership? Everyone has his or her perspective on what leadership is. These viewpoints can come from prior leaders, leaders someone has encountered whether positive or negative, or individuals who had an impact during childhood. Regardless, all these examples of leaders had qualities and attributes that made an impact on someone. Leadership is key to an organization being successful or not. In the Army, we have Army Regulation (AR) 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, that lays out the framework of a leader. This is helpful for young leaders to understand what they are expected to be; however, in my 22-year career, I have developed a leadership philosophy that has helped me lead my organizations. This philosophy includes the following areas: putting people first, being present, sharing hardships, maintaining standards and discipline, and prioritizing physical fitness. This may not be helpful for everyone, but I am hopeful that young leaders out there, who are trying to figure out their style of leadership, can take something from my philosophy.

## **People First**

This phrase has so many meanings and is different for everyone. From my perspective being a leader is not about you, it is about those you lead and mentor in your career. Servant leadership is the perfect style of leadership that puts people first. Over the years, I have tried my best to put the people I lead first. This includes recognition, awards, time off, eating last in the field, and ensuring that they are trained the best they can be to go to war. An example of this comes from my current organization. When I arrived, I wanted to do something to recognize a Soldier each week from the battalion that did something awesome. I implemented the "Warrior of the Week." Each company submits a nomination at the end of the week, and I then pick who out of the battalion will be recognized. I then present the Soldier a unit t-shirt on Facebook Live as his or her leader tells everyone why the individual was selected. Additionally, each nominee receives a certificate of achievement. It is awesome to see so many Soldiers recognized for the great things accomplished for the organization. Think about what people first means to you and do it.

If leaders demonstrate that they care enough for their Soldiers and continuously put their needs first, it will build cohesion and trust in the leader. Gaining trust from those you lead can be a huge task, but once the trust is built, it will create a cohesive organization. Be the leader who appreciates those they lead.

## **Being Present**

For a leader, some duties and responsibilities are required to be successful. One area that I have experienced that is not consistent is being present. Some leaders fill a position but do not do anything to lead their organization. Leaders should get out there and engage their Soldiers, get to know them, and understand what it is that makes them who they are. When you get to know those you lead, it can be rewarding for both you and the individual or group that you are speaking with. Daily engagement with Soldiers is a priority in my organization. Saying "hello" or "good morning" is one way to acknowledge your organization. See how someone's day is going, ask about their family, and ask what their plans are for the weekend. I am a college football fan so I like to talk about football and other sports with anyone I can. This can be so easy to do and does not take much effort but has a huge impact on those who need you to lead them. Always be the leader that you wanted.

## **Sharing Hardships**

It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day activities and forget about what your Soldiers are doing. When we give a task to our subordinates, whether leaders or Soldiers, we expect them to accomplish that task with minimal involvement from us. This is not always the case, and we must make it a point to change the way we think about how we lead our Soldiers. We need to get involved, not because we do not trust them but because we want to be out there with them. If Soldiers are filling sandbags, help them. We are not above doing these types of tasks at any level. This will continue to build trust and confidence in your leadership. Leaders who share hardships with their

organization build a culture that is positive and motivating, and then the organization will follow that leader to the end of the earth if asked. Do not forget where you came from.

### **Standards and Discipline**

In the Army, there are standard operating procedures (SOPs), regulations, and policies that everyone must follow. As leaders, it is our responsibility to enforce these areas and explain why they must be followed. Not enforcing the standards that have been set forth can lead to indiscipline. We must have disciplined formations to fight and win our nation's wars. Enforcing standards, in my opinion, is where we start building our disciplined formations. Leaders are where the enforcement starts. Understand your unit's SOPs and policies so you can enforce them within your organization. Do not get frustrated or upset at new Soldiers coming to the organizations who do not know how the Army works. It is not just standards you need to teach but also the life skills that will make them better prepared for their future. The more you teach them, the better they are — and the better your organization will be. Be an engaged leader who knows, lives, and enforces standards.

### **Physical Fitness**

Physical fitness is the basis of any military occupational specialty (MOS) in the Army. We must all be able to shoot, move, and communicate on the battlefield. If we are to participate in large-scale combat operations in the future, moving under load by foot is going to be required. Prepare your organization now. Do not wait. Build physical fitness plans that will get your Soldiers ready for conditions that will be physically demanding. Leadership at every echelon should ensure this happens. If someone becomes injured, make sure that individuals get the proper treatment and recovery so they can come back to your organization ready to fight. Leaders are responsible for ensuring their formations are physically fit. Ensure you do it but make sure that Soldiers are getting something out of what you have planned. This is not a task that should be taken off the calendar; it is one of the most important things you do. Be the difference for your organization.

### **Real-World Scenario**

A real-world example that brings all of these areas together occurred from August thru October 2021. As the battalion command sergeant major, my battalion deployed to Kuwait in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. While there, we received a no-notice mission to send part of our element to Qatar in support of a mission that is now known as Operation Allies Refugee. Once we arrived, we led a joint mission to process and move refugees coming from Afghanistan onward to other locations throughout the world. The operation required the ability to put people first by ensuring that we not only took care of those in uniform but also took care of the refugees while



**Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment gather in Kuwait following support of Operation Allies Refugee in Qatar from August-October 2021. While deployed, the unit processed more than 30,000 refugees fleeing Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment)**

we processed them. In order to have a successful mission, it took leaders being present and sharing hardships with the entire organization. The mission was stressful, exhausting, and chaotic; however, because the organization was physically fit and adhered to standards and discipline, it was successful. This is just one example of how my leadership philosophy contributed to success.

### **Conclusion**

As leaders, we need to build a culture of trust and cohesion in our organizations. If an organization's culture lacks trust and cohesion, accomplishing missions will be harder and can lead to indiscipline. Leaders must be subject matter experts in their field and be able to excel at both garrison and tactical operations. If we cannot do both, we will not be able to train, mentor, and lead others to do the same. When I address my organization, I talk about when individuals become a sergeant or second lieutenant they are a leader until they get out of the Army, whether that is in three years or 20 years. This can be in any capacity they find themselves. Be a good leader, know your organization, and do the right things to take care of those you lead. We as leaders never arrive, we continue to grow and develop until the day we get out of the Army. Use your leadership to influence your organization in a positive way. This is how our Army will continue to be the best in the world and answer our nation's call when needed.

**CSM Jesse J. Clark** currently serves as the senior enlisted leader of 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) at Fort Polk, LA. He began his military career in February 2000 when he enlisted in the Army Reserves as a hospital food specialist with the 256th Combat Support Hospital in Cleveland. After 9/11, he joined active duty as an Infantryman. He attended Infantry One Station Unit Training and Airborne School at Fort Benning, GA, and was then assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC. He has served as an infantry team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant, first sergeant, observer-coach-trainer, and operations sergeant major. He has deployed twice to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, once to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, to Poland in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, to Kuwait in support of Operation Spartan Shield and Operation Inherent Resolve, and to Qatar in support of Operation Allies Refugee. CSM Clark earned an associate's degree in general studies from Troy University as well as bachelor's and master's degrees in organizational leadership from Columbia Southern University.