

A Grunt's Reflections on Leadership

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Throughout my time in the U.S. Army, I have benefited from the incredible decisive leadership of superiors, subordinates, and peers. The Army afforded me the privilege and opportunity to lead Soldiers and take care of their families across multiple echelons. Like others, I have led, followed, and served during incredible times of stress against a free-thinking enemy trying to kill us. I have also led, followed, and served in times of great ambiguity, and at times political turmoil. These experiences and the people I have met helped to shape, grow, and cultivate my personal philosophy on service and leadership. Many lessons in the art of leadership came from my own mistakes, and other moments of levity came from those who were honest and humble enough to share their mistakes with me.

The cost of preparing our Soldiers and their families for combat and lengthy periods of separation is never far from my mind. As leaders in the Army, our job is to accomplish the mission while caring for and protecting Soldiers and their families. Sometimes this comes at a painstaking cost. My hope is that I can pass along lessons I have learned, both positive and negative, to help you in your leadership journey.

Outside of combat, one of my greatest leadership challenges was leading a formation of more than 700 Soldiers and employees as an infantry battalion commander during the height of COVID while conducting an interagency mission to receive, stage, protect, and onward move our Afghan friends to enable their safety and opportunity in America. I was amazed at our young leaders' creativity and ingenuity to overcome significant and complex challenges outside the expertise of an infantry battalion, with minimal guidance. Below are seven maxims. They are not all my original thoughts, nor do they represent all critical



An infantry squad assaults through the breach during a platoon live-fire exercise at Fort Campbell, KY, in 2020. (Photos courtesy of author)

and necessary leadership values, but ones I value greatly and will apply no matter where I serve in life as I continue to grow.

Followership

You must be a good follower before you can be a sound leader. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, states, “Every Army leader is a subordinate to someone, so all leaders are also followers.”¹ Just like any job, the Army also subscribes to the “do” first before you can lead approach. For example, Infantry Soldiers enter the U.S. Army as riflemen. After serving time as riflemen, they may be promoted to carry and employ the squad automatic weapon (SAW), which has a higher volume and delivery of small arms. After demonstrating proficiency as the SAW gunner, Soldiers may then be elevated to team leader in charge of three to four personnel, then squad leader in charge of nine to 11 personnel, and so on. This model is not new to many organizations, and there are always exceptions based on the needs of the unit and levels of individual proficiency. However, those who can become proficient at their individual craft, learn the job of their superior, and perform the job of those they lead become the example of a proficient and skillful follower. This type of follower is not just individually proficient but capable of effective and concise communication and often requires minimal direction from their first-line supervisor. ADP 6-22 outlines, “Followers respond to the authority of a leader and specific direction. Following is more than just doing what one is told to do. Motivation is an aspect of following. Effective followership requires an ability to take the initiative to get things done when necessary. Effective leaders learn to be trusted followers.”²

Today’s young people want to know the “why” at every cost and availability. At times, this can be frustrating based on short timelines, or for a combat tactical unit, during times of high tactical risk. Over time, I learned to explain the “why” to your subordinates when you can, then be willing to trust the organization to accomplish its mission when time does not avail. This leadership technique requires building a foundation of trust and efficient processes that enables action within the entirety of the organization’s leadership. This does not happen overnight. These processes and mutual trust require months and months of training, exercises, and refining those processes not only from the top down, but more importantly, from the bottom to the top. I was lucky; I had the best company commander any Soldier could ask for while serving in the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment. I would follow him anywhere and I did... so did the company for one year into Iraq’s Sunni Triangle, aka the “Triangle of Death.” Of my four combat deployments, this one was the most violent and brutal tour, and it required profound and unwavering trust amongst the formation, to include trust in our leadership to provide our Soldiers the necessary resources and assets to accomplish the mission as well as trust in one another to protect each Soldier with their own life. When our peers, superiors, and even subordinates trust in our ability to be a good follower, then we begin to transition into a ready and capable leader.

Read the Room

Problem sets will always evolve and at times completely change direction or shape when confronted by individuals, resources, and allocated time to further analyze and solve the problem. Therefore, lead with empathy, compassion, love, and undying enforcement of doing the hard-right thing. I have learned that it is incredibly important to actively survey our changing environment; this can be from feedback and sensing sessions with bosses, peers, and our formation (employees). New and innovative ideas from brand new privates or a new employee can often provide fresh and enlightening perspectives or a unique way to tackle a problem.

Make the Tough Decisions

Respected versus liked — you must be willing to make the tough choices. As a battalion commander, I conducted platoon leader (first-line managers) physical training once a month, followed by breakfast. This gave me the opportunity to receive feedback from the lower echelon and gain an appreciation for the real and tangible challenges these young leaders were facing within their formations. I valued these sessions,



An infantry team leader assesses the battlefield and communicates with his fire team during a squad situational exercise at Fort Campbell in the summer of 2021.

and they helped me reinforce my priorities. More importantly, these sessions helped me understand where I needed to shift focus based on the ground truth. At the end of each session, I always walked away with information that I either did not know or had held a previous misconception. Likewise, I was able to communicate the “why” to these young leaders. When we ended the session, I asked one thing of every platoon leader: Make the tough decision.

A deputy commanding general once asked me: “How do you want your organization to be remembered?” My answer was as premier warfighters. In my case as an infantry company and battalion commander, I wanted the organizations I was privileged to lead and be a part of to be the best infantry and combined arms warfighting force on earth. For instance, no one on an American football team practices and competes in a game wanting to lose, miss the playoffs, or intentionally fall short of a successful season. No one starts a season saying, “I sure hope we lose the first three games.”

Similarly, as an infantry company commander and infantry battalion commander, I wanted to practice (train) the best I could with our team and be the most dedicated, lethal infantry formation in combat if called to fight and win our nation’s wars. Why wouldn’t you? At times, this was a personal challenge of mine, which gets at the root of the problem of explaining the “why” to our young leaders — and often why these decisions to train so aggressively are made to prepare our force to succeed in combat. I have commanded in combat and in peacetime; peacetime was harder. Part of this environment requires you, as a leader, to make the tough, often unpopular, decisions. Additionally, teaching your subordinates to make tough decisions will not only strengthen your organization through the empowerment of others but also increase trust in the organization. It will also foster a sense of pride that all are making a truly positive impact and that their voices are helping to build the organizational fabric of success.

Your decision may not always be popular, but this is a component that I believe is often missing from truly creating and maintaining a “people first” organization capable of warfighting. In an era that often promotes popularity over competency, making the tough decision is not as easy as it may seem. While serving in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), our formation participated in a 30-day exercise with the rest of the division, which was deliberately protecting precious time and resources to enable subordi-

nate units to hone their tactical proficiencies. It was summer in Kentucky, and it was hot. At the end of the exercise, I made the decision to conduct a 12-mile tactical foot march back to garrison. As you can imagine, this was wildly unpopular with Soldiers, family members, and even some of my superiors. I consulted with my senior NCO, several confidants, and even my wife. Yes, my wife. I weighed the options, analyzed the risk, and implemented risk-mitigating measures, such as walking at night to minimize the risk of heat exhaustion, and chose to stay the course. Walking at night also enabled the entire battalion to move under combat load with night-vision devices, which many units rarely train. I knew our formation not only was more than capable of completing this physical challenge but would be even more prepared for combat and find immense pride in its accomplishment. As usual, our Soldiers exceeded my expectations.

Make the tough choice and do the right thing. I find that when life is consistently easy, I may not be making enough tough decisions. Tough decisions can be made with dignity and respect for our employees, their welfare, and the efficacy of the organization. T.R. Fehrenbach wrote in his classic account of the Korean War, *This Kind of War*:

“Americans fully understand the requirements of the football field or the baseball diamond. They discipline themselves and suffer by the thousands to prepare for these rigors. A coach or manager who is too permissive soon seeks a new job; his teams fail against those who are tougher and harder. Yet undoubtedly any American officer, in peacetime, who worked his men as hard, or ruled them as severely as a college football coach does, would be removed. But the shocks of the battlefield are a hundred times those of the playing field, and the outcome infinitely more important to the nation.”³

Lead Up

Your leaders are human — so are you. Your leaders will make mistakes and so will you. If you have a leader who is unwilling to listen to your rationale, explain your plan and intended actions (how you plan to solve the problem), and if your direction and guidance is legal, moral, and ethical, execute. Communicate often and early. It may take a while, but your supervisor or leader will thank you later when they realize you not only solved a complex problem that they maybe did not have the time or capacity for but also helped to enhance the organization, allowing the leader to focus attention elsewhere. An incredible mentor taught me that we follow orders, but we have a moral obligation to not blindly follow orders. This may seem controversial to some, but as you mature in any organization and weigh levels of risk, you have a moral obligation to right the ship. Hopefully, your subordinates trust you enough to come to you when you are unintentionally missing the mark.



An infantry squad traverses across dense terrain during a thunderstorm at Fort Knox, KY, in the fall of 2021.

One of my greatest leadership struggles came during my time as a battalion commander. My boss would power down or turn off the minute I walked into the room, or even when I spoke during an office call or organizational meeting. Additionally, I had a few subordinate leaders who had their own agendas, which were not in the unit's best interest. I was feeling the pressure on both ends, and yes, it was still during COVID. I tried desperately reaching out to others for advice on how to better communicate, and I began to doubt myself when I truly realized after many months that no matter what I did, said, or articulated how I was aiming to help the greater organization, there was nothing I could do to energize or gain my superior's trust. I had lost confidence in myself and my capabilities. I asked the leader if we could speak privately and shared that I felt he turned off when I spoke and was not truly present when I needed him to hear me. I also tried to articulate the problem could be me, and that I was working on my ability to effectively communicate. My boss expressed shock at this and then thanked me for my candor. At first, I was completely relieved; I thought we both had a breakthrough in a positive direction. Weeks later, I realized that this perceived groundbreaking conversation was a proverbial kiss of death; for the next year, this leader continuously brought up to me that I thought he was not present or focused. I was heartbroken — my intentions were sincere yet naive.

I had several choices going forward, and I was the senior battalion commander in our brigade. I was fully aware my actions had consequences and could negatively impact the greater organization. I could be argumentative, combative, defiant, or even silent. Or I could set a positive example and continue to communicate how our team was conducting remarkable feats, executing tough and realistic training, and solving the higher organization's problems without being asked. I chose the latter. Going forward, I invited this leader to every training opportunity and family event in the organization. I explained to my boss how our organization was supporting the higher organization and then just moved out and executed regardless of his lack of attention. The results of the amazing Soldiers and leaders did their own talking most of the time. I did not wallow in the lack of accolades or affirmation. The organization was all the better, and I grew to accept that you may not always be liked, but you can be respected. Your organization deserves your best regardless of its surroundings, which leads me to point five.

Effective Communication

I once had a leader who led with effective communication as the center piece of his leadership philosophy. This is especially true across all echelons but even more important at higher echelons. Do not take everything personally; most of the time a failure to achieve a task is not a direct snub on you as a leader but rather a miscommunication or lack of shared understanding. Do not leave matters up to interpretation. I give you the metaphorical blue square. If the square needs to be colored blue, tell your subordinates it needs to be blue; if you have time, tell them why it needs to be blue. If you do not have time, trust your subordinates to color the square blue, and then when you do have time circle back around and explain the reasoning behind the "why" blue. The concise coloring of the metaphorical blue square will save time, resources, and lives one day and is not a violation of trust or mission command; one day your subordinates will thank you when that "coloring of a blue square" becomes the timely prosecution of an accurate artillery fire mission in a foreign land against a lethal and devout enemy.⁴

As a company executive officer in 2006 in southwest Baghdad, my company commander gave me an order to take an element of about 40 Soldiers more than 20 kilometers away from our main post and establish a perimeter which would ultimately begin the generation of combat power to assist in the search and recovery of a downed U.S. aircraft and its pilot and further enable offensive operations for the brigade combat team. The place was called Rushdi Mullah, and it was a hot bed of activity for the Iraq origin of al Qaeda. Due to operational demands, risk, and the necessity for timely and quick execution, there was minimal time for long planning sessions and discussions. My company commander helped outline the problem set, identified the minimum force (assets and resources) requirements, and sent us on our way with confidence. Was I scared? Ummm... yes. Was I confident that my boss had provided me with the resources necessary to accomplish the mission, and that a team of teams surrounded me to execute the



Soldiers of Alpha (Hardrock) Company, 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, gather for a group photo in Rushdi Mullah, Iraq, in 2006.

mission? Without question. The operation did not come without turmoil, blood, sweat, and tears, but we painted the square blue and it was a deep and resilient blue.

Failure Equals Success

Everyone fails — this is how we learn. In my experience, many senior leaders in the Army are often quick to give the magical recipe to success that more than likely mirrors how they achieved professional success. These leaders mean well, but many times this advice is obsolete (e.g., evaluation rankings, “you’ll be okay, it worked out for me,” or “never leave the operational force, keep a rucksack on your back.”) Instead, the truly “elite” leaders outline their failures and mishaps and what they learned from those mistakes. Everyone clearly understands based on their rank or position if they were successful.

One of my many failures as a leader in the Army was not reaching down fast enough to ensure that all Soldiers at the lowest level heard from me about my intent and/or command philosophy on what I expected for a healthy and cohesive climate. I had written these thoughts down and disseminated them as COVID locked the world down, but I did not personally follow up fast enough. I learned quickly after a few months that you cannot rely on all leaders to carry your message in the manner that you would communicate it and spent the second half of my command communicating directly down to all levels. I circulated to every training event possible or subordinate locations during real-world operations. There is a time to allow for failure, and there is a time where failure could cost lives. Understand the difference in environments and enable an environment that promotes innovation, healthy risk-taking, and the opportunity to succeed while learning from failure. If you are the boss, you own the risk, deliberately assess the risk, and underwrite the risk with your subordinates. Your team will amaze you — I promise.

Self-Care

Last but far from least, take time for yourself routinely; it will only benefit the organization you lead, whether that is snagging an extra couple of hours of sleep once a week, playing ball with your kids, going for a long run, having dinner with your spouse or friend at your favorite restaurant, or going rock climbing. The organization you lead requires you to make logical and sound decisions. Invest in your mental, spiritual, and physical well-being; it will benefit those you lead and help you to serve the greater purpose of achieving the unit’s mission. No one will care for you like you or your immediate friends or family.

In conclusion, I have come to learn that life is not fair, nor is any organization completely. You cannot please everyone. Follow your heart, listen to others — truly listen, and empower junior leaders — they want to please their leadership. Our Soldiers and employees want to train hard and be a valued member of an elite, successful organization. If they were missing the mark, it was generally because I did not communicate my vision or intent clearly, and I needed to pause the action or organization and clarify myself. Sometimes it was even because I did not provide adequate resources to the problem set or effectively read the room to

realize employee emotions with respect to the task. It is okay to admit when you are wrong or missing the mark; your Soldiers or employees will respect you even more. You can propel your organization to success by demonstrating and encouraging sound followership, by striving to better understand your environment and its surroundings, by leading up and making the tough decisions to help solve greater organizational problems, by exercising effective communication, and by taking care of yourself to allow your organization to get the best you. Your people deserve your best. You deserve your best.

Author's Note: *This article is dedicated to all those brave souls I have had the privilege to serve alongside with, to those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and to the future brave souls that carry the fire.*⁵

Notes

¹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Leadership*, 25 November 2019, para 1-102.

² Ibid, para 1-103.

³ T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: The Classic Military History of the Korean War* (New York: Open Road, 1963), preface, xi.

⁴ Mission command is the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation. Further analysis on mission command can be found in ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 31 July 2019, para 1-3.

⁵ Carry the fire is a metaphor for maintaining hope with nobility and honor. The metaphor was written by Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, First Edition ed., (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

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