



SELECTING LEADERS

GEORGE G. EDDY

Being able to assess the leadership ability of your subordinates is an important part of being a leader at any level. I found that out several years ago when I became the commander of a battalion in an armored division in Europe.

I inherited a going outfit complete with five companies, no two of which were in the same location, along with the usual set of company commanders, noncommissioned officers, and the like. I use "going" in the sense that the unit existed; where it was going was one of the things I would have to determine, and soon.

The battalion was about to undergo an IG inspection and what was then called a command materiel and maintenance inspection, reputedly a tough one. Additionally, my battalion was scheduled to furnish observers and umpires for another division's field exercise, which would just about wipe out the battalion staff and one company of officers and senior NCOs for about two weeks.

I suppose I should have taken some solace in the fact that no enemy was shooting at us and no tidal waves, earthquakes, or volcanic eruptions were approaching, even if it did feel like something of the sort. (As a matter of fact, my change of command ceremony had to be held indoors at the last minute because the sky seemed to turn upside down, unleashing a torrent. Perhaps that should have been an omen for me, but I was too busy with more pressing matters to wonder about it.)

To make matters worse, I knew no one in the battalion or the division, and when I did meet the division commander and the assistant division commander for support, their only advice was to "get with it," which I assured them I intended to do, and that was that.

As part of my preparation for this challenge — and I was to appreciate the full meaning of the word later — I did visit the battalion and my predecessor one Sunday afternoon shortly before he departed for another assignment. After he gave me a brief rundown on the battalion and its key personnel, he asked me if I had any questions. So I jumped at the chance to ask him what he thought were the major problems facing the battalion. When, after a long pause, he replied that he could not think of any, I knew I was in trouble — and I was.

My first task was to get acquainted with my new unit as quickly as possible and particularly to size up its key officers and NCOs, and I did not have much time. I had to call on all my prior experience in working with others to help me assess the strengths and shortcomings of those on whom I would have to depend for the battalion's overall performance. While I will not go into detail on exactly what I learned and what I did, let me say that what I found was extremely disturbing. Essentially, the battalion was under severe criticism, was floundering, regarded as jaded, and rife with tension and fear. Somehow I had to change this environment.

In my later reflections about this experience, I have tried to reanalyze the events and the actions — things I



tried that worked and those that did not. All in all, I think the outcome was more than satisfactory — my successes outnumbered the failures by a good margin. In such after-action contemplations, though, the usual question is: What would you do differently if you were in a position to do it again?

For one thing, if it had been possible, I would have preferred to choose my own unit commanders and senior NCOs, rather than just accepting those who were present when I arrived, and I would not have selected several who were there. (Since no two units were co-located, I did not have the option of moving them around from one unit to another until I found a better combination.)

TECHNIQUE

But assuming I could have chosen them, how would I have gone about it? Is there a technique available that is easy to use and that provides useful information to help in making a selection decision? I think there is — one that involves some, but certainly not all, of the critical ingredients.

The technique that I propose includes an initial interview, followed by asking each “candidate” to take the accompanying test.

A MATTER OF IDENTITY

In a military organization, there are five individuals: Tom Smith, Bill Houston, Barbara Jones, George Blankston, and Harry Brown. These five hold the following positions, but not

respectively: company commander, clerk-typist, first sergeant, mechanic, and drill sergeant. From the clues listed below, determine who occupies which position in the organization:

1. The clerk-typist bandaged the mechanic's finger when he cut it using the former's nail file.
2. While the company commander and the mechanic were out of town on a mission, the first sergeant put Blankston and Brown on report for leaving the area without authority.
3. The first sergeant was a sharp card player, and Smith admired his ability.
4. Brown invited the clerk-typist to lunch, but his invitation was not accepted.

This is a test that should take only a few minutes to finish. Try it and see for yourself. (The solution is presented farther along in the article). You may find it difficult or you may breeze right through it. In either case, you may be skeptical that anything so simple could reveal anything significant about leadership, but it does.

For one thing, I believe this test gives some insight into the method or technique each person uses to figure out the answers. As the applicants are working on it, you should walk around the room and observe just how they are going about it. All they have is one blank sheet of paper and a pen or pencil, but what they enter on that single sheet can tell you a lot.

Everyone in a position of leadership faces a seemingly endless parade of problems every day, and it is important for us to know what method a leader follows in trying to solve these problems. We should be interested in knowing whether he has the ability to separate fact from fiction, to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant facts, and to interpret the meanings and consequences of the facts. In

known, a leader should be able to identify cause and effect relationships and should know the difference between a routine matter and an urgent one. He should know whether the means exist for him to carry out a decision and how much time he might need to do it.

Precisely how a person goes about making a decision is a matter of real concern, and although it is not necessary for everyone to use the same problem-solving approach, there ought to be some logic in whatever method each one uses. In this connection, we need to consider the part that assumptions play in this process. We all make assumptions, because it is easier than going out and gathering the data we need to approach the problem some other way. If we do go out and search for data, we must decide what facts are needed, and then where and how to acquire them. Then we have to study them, sort them, discard some, and interpret the meaning of the ones that are left. It is understandable, then, that we just make some assumptions and proceed from them. And there are occasions when assumptions are not only acceptable, but essential, but hurriedly conceived assumptions are dangerous and are the direct enemy of careful thought. (Few people would want to be tried in a court where the judge, at the opening moment of the trial, called out, "Bring the guilty man in!")

Returning to the test itself, usually about 60 percent of the people tested fall into the assumptions trap, assuming that Barbara Jones has to be the clerk-typist. They then try to force-fit the remaining "facts."

Only a handful of people I have seen take the test will even try to set up a matrix and follow any systematic procedure. Most seem to use the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey approach. As I go around the room looking at their papers, what I see most often is a mishmash of illegible scribbles, doodles, erasures, mark-overs, and so on. Most seem content just to stab at it and hope for the best. Some, of course, don't even try, and others quit trying almost immediately.

What these observations reveal about the thought processes of the people is most significant if they are to be leaders — officers or NCOs. I believe that prospective leaders ought to be able to think clearly, concisely, and

SOLUTION

This test lends itself to a matrix approach, using the process of elimination as a basic technique. Of course, this technique will not apply to all problems, but the point is that some systematic way ought to be employed in analyzing each problem.

For this instrument, the matrix can be set up as indicated below. The order of the names is immaterial.

	Co Cdr	Clerk- Typist	First Sgt	Mech- anic	Drill Sgt
Barbara Jones			3	1	
Tom Smith			3		
Bill Houston					
George Blankston	2		2	2	
Harry Brown	2	4	2	2	

By placing the clue numbers in each column, we have shown that that particular position is eliminated as a possibility for that person. The first clue, for example, establishes that the mechanic is male, so Jones cannot be the mechanic. As each clue is entered in the appropriate columns, we eventually get to the discovery of the first match of name with position. With all other possibilities eliminated, Brown is revealed as the drill sergeant. Then by placing an X in the drill sergeant column next to the other names, Blankston is shown to be the clerk-typist, and so on until we see that Jones is the company commander, Smith, the mechanic, and Houston, the first sergeant.

logically. They must develop a mental discipline through extensive practice so that when they are confronted with a major emergency they can act decisively, because they are prepared. And given the tools with which to assess the abilities of the leaders under him, so is their commander.

I surely do not contend that this is all there is to the subject of leadership, for clearly there is a great deal more, and I certainly agree with others who hold that leadership is an "intriguing and beguiling phenomenon."



GEORGE G. EDDY, a retired Army colonel, is on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin, from which he earned a doctorate in 1974. He has written numerous articles on leadership and management topics and a book on small businesses. His active military service included tours in Korea and Vietnam and one as a maintenance battalion commander in the 4th Armored Division.

