

# the leadership dozen

GEORGE G. EDDY



The most fascinating, exciting, and (to some) perhaps mysterious of subjects is LEADERSHIP. It has also been called an intriguing and beguiling phenomenon. And it is all these things.

For centuries this subject has attracted our never-tiring attention, and despite all the studies and books and articles and pamphlets and discourses and debates on it, we still seem to want more. It is an issue that we seemingly cannot put aside. Nor should we, because we realize that we still have more to learn; and in this realization we should remain excited about acquiring more understanding.

So, in spite of all the aspects of leadership that we claim to know, there are still some gaps. This is demonstrated by the unending difficulty we seem to have in con-

sistently identifying those who will become good leaders. Our powers of prediction, in other words, are not very strong.

The plight of the American automobile industry, for example, is well known as it struggles to keep pace with the Japanese. Many American business leaders have convinced themselves, apparently, that the Japanese have somehow discovered a magic formula that they, too, should immediately find and emulate. So they rush to Japan or flock to seminars that purport to "reveal all." Major U.S. corporations hire experts on Japanese management to show the way with "quality circles" and the like. But, in truth, have the Japanese actually invented something new? Or have they been practicing what Americans once knew and have either forgotten or dis-



carded? My own belief is in the latter.

In any event, perhaps we have not been studying the right things, or perhaps there is something wrong with our research techniques. Nonetheless, we have to press ahead, viewing much of the academic research with considerable skepticism, and believing that our common sense will put us right. For example, we usually can pinpoint the obvious "stars" and the obvious clunks, and we can deal fairly well with these extremes. It's that large group of people in the middle that keeps giving us trouble. Few would dispute the contention that we have our work cut out for us as we poke and pry into this middle group, trying to separate the potential doers from the watchers and the merely bewildered. It is in this connection that I hope what I am offering will contribute to at least a part of the solution.

We ought to start by defining what leadership is. I like the simple declaration that leadership is the practice of getting others to do what we want done and — if we are really good at it — to get them to like it while they're doing it. We are familiar with the various techniques of accomplishing this fundamental task, from the autocratic to the participative approaches that have found much favor among behavioral scientists. General George S. Patton, Jr., for instance, used to claim that he owed his success to the fact that he was "the best damned ass kicker in the Army." I think the record shows that he was skilled at considerably more than merely swinging his boot. Few, in fact, would question his abilities as a superb combat leader.

Recent studies of leadership tell us that there is no single best approach for all circumstances, that a leader needs to be able to switch his leadership style to suit the occasion. An emergency, for example, requires an instant response to orders, not a call for a vote on whether to respond. Adapting to the needs of the situation is termed the "contingency" approach. This places stringent demands on perception and rapid adjustment. Those who advise us to "hang loose" do not exactly have strong leadership in mind, but the point is quite clear.

Military leadership has much in common with leadership in other professions, but there is also a critical distinction: the actions and decisions of a military leader *directly affect men's lives*. There is no greater stake or responsibility than this. That's why those who are concerned about this really awesome responsibility spend so much time and energy and debate on the subject of leadership.

At this point, perhaps we should ask what sort of attributes a leader should have if he is to cope with the stringent demands of his position? What, in other words, should we look for in a leader? A leader should be energetic, perceptive, persistent, decisive, considerate, and flexible (yet firm). He should be reasonably intelligent, physically and mentally sound, technically competent, mature and stable (especially under stress), and responsibly daring. He should be an organizer and should have good judgment (common sense), and a high degree

of integrity (fairness).

Most of us are quite familiar with these attributes, so let's accept the list as reasonable and go on to examine some other aspects that have not received the attention I think they deserve. I call them the Leadership Dozen.

### Watch Out for the Unready and Unwilling

A good leader has to really enjoy being one. Nobody should be pushed or dragged or booted into a leadership slot. One of the biggest mistakes we make is to promote — formally or informally — the unwilling and the unready. Not everyone wants to be a leader; and not everyone is cut out to be a leader. Yet the system presumes that almost everyone is eager to take on this awesome responsibility. In fact, the system does not just presume, it applies considerable pressure and even sanctions against those who are *not* eager.

This means, then, that those in positions of influence need to evaluate their subordinates very carefully indeed. They should not push someone into a position just to fill a quota or for any other reason. If they persist and force the issue, they may destroy a good man who is fine in his own element but is really unsuited for a more demanding role.

It is never in the interests of an organization to destroy the talent it has. In this regard, we should be careful not to promote an individual who is technically proficient but who has never demonstrated that he is also competent to work with or to supervise others. Technical competence does not automatically confer human relations skills, nor do these skills automatically develop with the passage of time. Despite this "obvious" fact, we not only continue to promote the technician, we usually fail to give him a sensible transition period or any real guidance in acquiring and practicing human relations skills.

### Develop an Appropriate Risk Tolerance Factor

To bring someone else along and groom him for increased responsibility, we must be prepared to assume the risk of failure. This is seldom easy, for it entails putting our own necks on the line for the mistakes of our subordinates. The critical questions for a leader are: How long is your neck? And how much are you attached to it in its present state? Let's face it. It is not possible to develop another person without giving him enough latitude to exercise some independent judgment.

We know that when a child is learning to walk he falls down a lot. If we try to prevent his falling, he will not be inclined to move out on his own; thus, his development will be stunted. The same applies to giving a novice leader enough leeway. The valid test is by trial, and we must learn to keep hands off! Naturally, a wise mentor will provide appropriate checks or restraints to give the novice enough options while still keeping matters within

certain boundaries. As the prospective leader progresses, these constraints can and should be lifted or modified to keep encouraging him to display more initiative and resourcefulness.

Another significant point to remember is that we must show that we can accept bad news. For some, this is close to impossible, and they so berate the bearer of such news that those who first hear of it tend to suppress it. In days of yore, when kings used to behead such messengers, this tended to create a lot of vacancies in the ranks. Those individuals who were forced into such positions had to become especially artful in camouflaging or altering the facts. The superior who exploded on hearing about an impending disaster was thus gradually and inevitably denied knowledge of the actual events, frequently until it was too late for him to effect any remedies. Similarly, if we berate our neophyte leaders for every mistake, they will soon stop taking any risks, and their development will wither away.

### **Avoid Micro Management**

One of the curses of the information explosion is that it enables us to know so much about what is occurring at subordinate levels. And when we know something, the temptation to meddle can become irresistible and, in the worst cases, endemic. Bypassing the normal channels of authority, therefore, is one of the worst of organizational sins. Such tendencies are not easily controlled, despite the havoc that can result from such interference by superiors.

(Incidentally, this tendency also is present at the company and platoon level, where some officers cannot keep from interfering with the responsibilities and authorities of the NCOs. Perhaps we ought to hang a big sign in front of the desks of such superiors: "Thou Shalt Keep Thy \_\_\_\_\_ Hands Off!" (You are free to fill in the blank.) Better still, if we could employ all the technological devices at our disposal, we should be able to somehow arrange for a large bolt of electricity to enter the meddler's body at the very instant of his interference. It's interesting to contemplate, isn't it?)

### **Become a Great Asker of Questions**

We cannot function without accurate and reliable information. We can learn, of course, by reading and observing. But we can also learn a lot by asking good questions. We are all familiar with this investigative technique as practiced by the detective and the physician. Why should we be content to let it stop there?

It is essential that we develop a knack for asking important, pertinent questions — questions that I like to call "critical" questions, those that get right to the heart of the issue at hand. It's not that difficult to do, but it does require some practice. After a while, if we work at it hard enough, it becomes second nature.

Since not everyone likes to volunteer information, we have to take the initiative to find out what we want to know. (And yes, we sometimes need to be wary, too, of those who seem especially eager to tell us things.)

The general rule ought to be to ask specific questions that elicit specific replies. We need to remember, too, that people have a general tendency to tell the questioner what they think he wants to know. They do this usually in the hope that he will be pleased and go away.

An example of a poor question comes quickly to mind, one we probably resort to several times every day: "How're you doing?" And the typical response is almost always, "Fine." If we ask this type of question, we'll never learn anything important. Nor will we deserve to. [See the author's article, "Taking Command," in *INFANTRY*, May-June 1983 for examples of a questioning approach he has found useful.]

### **Become a Great Listener, a Seeker of Answers**

It doesn't do any good for us to ask good questions if we are not also good listeners. Unfortunately, most of us are actually very poor listeners. We just don't take the pains to concentrate on what the other fellow is trying to tell us. We get lazy, start screening out what we think is trivial and at that point begin to think about something else entirely. Before we know it, the conversation is over and we haven't really heard a thing.

The art of listening does not come naturally, though. We have to practice it. We go to great lengths to practice our golf or our tennis, because we already know that if we take our eye off that ball, if we lose our concentration, the consequences are going to be painful. We simply cannot function without accurate and reliable information. Doesn't it make sense, then, to apply the same effort to listening? Just as an athlete conditions his body, we need to discipline our minds and pay more attention to what others are trying to tell us.

### **Beware the Obvious**

*Obvious* is a greatly overworked word. When you come right down to it, what really is obvious? To whom? And under what circumstances? Is it obvious that John did something wrong because he didn't know what he was doing? Or was it because of conditions beyond his control — conditions that weren't so "obvious" at the time?

Being snared by the obvious is the same thing as jumping to conclusions. If you see someone standing in front of a jewelry store, then hear the burglar alarm go off and watch that same person go running off, he's obviously the burglar, isn't he? Especially if he looked furtive — looked like a crook. We spend much of our lives acting on assumptions, because it is so easy: We don't have to go out and collect data and analyze it and verify it. We

just assume that such and such is the truth without verification, and we make our decisions accordingly.

We are familiar with stereotypes, and we put all sorts of labels on people. He's a *liberal*, or she's a *radical*, and so on. But what do these labels mean? Well, the meanings are up for grabs. And since they are so fuzzy or downright misleading, they fog up our thought processes. We take the easy way out, jump to that absurd conclusion, accept that ridiculous assumption, believe that undefined label. And what happens is that we make bum decisions and become objects of ridicule.

### Keep Your Head Out of the Sand

It is essential that you develop a broad perspective on your environment and not be content just to focus on immediate problems and demands — as pressing as they may be. In modern organizations, many elements are interrelated and, consequently, the actions of each element affect the others. These interactions are not always immediately perceived and may, in fact, go unnoticed for a long time.

We can recognize these kinds of interactions within a unit — or we certainly should be able to — but it is easy to ignore the "outside" factors. I believe this is a mistake, for what occurs outside the unit may become extremely important sooner than we realize. We should get into the habit of continually scanning this external environment for evidence of both beneficial and potentially harmful developments.

A business executive searches for opportunities to exploit, for example, and for threats to counter. So it should be with a military organization. This means that a leader's job is just that much more complex, but that's the way things are today.

### Don't Get Too Comfortable

We all like to relax once in a while, to get comfortable. There's nothing really wrong with this desire — unless as leaders we get too comfortable with our situation. (Another word for comfortable is *complacent*.) A leader's work is never done. His job goes on and on, if it is done right. Certainly a leader can and should relax at appropriate times; in fact, his health and personal well-being demand it. A weary and exhausted commander is not a good decision-maker.

The point here is that a leader needs to keep things moving, keep his men challenged and caught up in their responsibilities. He needs to keep innovating, to transform the routine and the mundane into the dynamic and the exciting. Not only should he keep his own mind active, he should encourage all those around him to be alert for new and better things. Naturally, I am not suggesting that a leader should keep his unit in constant turmoil with change after change after change. That would

be absurd. The idea is for him to stimulate his people to even greater effectiveness and to encourage them to strive for more demanding goals.

### Know When to Seek Advice

There are times when all of us could use some effective advice. The critical part is knowing when to seek it (and from whom). There are some real psychological barriers to be overcome, though, in this sort of endeavor. There are those, for example, who believe that asking for help is a sign of weakness, and they steadfastly refuse to consider doing it. There are others who are overly sensitive to either expressed or implied criticism of their operations, especially from an outsider. There are still others who are embarrassed by some of their own mistakes and do not want anyone else to discover them.

We can do young leaders a great service by pointing out to them how important it is to recognize when there is a problem or a developing situation that is beyond their control or their ability to resolve. If a leader has established a bond of trust and mutual respect between himself and his subordinates, then this should go a long way toward dispelling the typical misgivings that usually attend a request for assistance. If such a bond does not exist, then it is up to the leader to build it — and fast. If he cannot do this with a particular subordinate, then he should replace that subordinate with another who can earn his respect.

In some cases, a leader should seek advice from members of the unit as well. Those closest to the action and the problems associated with it usually have some excellent ideas for improvement. By all means, the leader should ask those individuals for their suggestions. And, of course, he should make sure they get the credit in a way that lets everyone else in the unit know about it.

### Stability and Unit Cohesiveness

The turnover of key personnel is the bane of organizational stability. Commanders at higher levels who have some say in assignment and reassignment policies are the key to the solution to this problem. But even within a company, its commander has a great deal to say about the time his soldiers spend in an assignment. For instance, he should reflect carefully before making any personnel changes, and he should try to gauge the implications of those changes for the individual soldiers and for the unit itself.

Cohesiveness requires some glue, and people should stick to their jobs until they become proficient. They are the ones who set the examples for newcomers to emulate through earned respect for their demonstrated competence. Men need some worthwhile affiliation, something with which they can identify with pride, and they need to develop the same spirit of comradeship that

forms the cornerstone of loyalty to their immediate groups and, ultimately, to their organizations.

### Concentrate on the Individual

Most of the studies of military organizations, especially those made of units in combat, tend to focus on the units and not on the men in those units. Since men function on a unit basis, this approach is understandable. But it does appear to ignore the individual soldier. We speak almost always of squads and crews and batteries and troops. We say that each man is a member of a team and that he is expected to contribute his part. This is most important, we point out, especially when it is reinforced by the strong personal ties and the allegiance we want to see develop within that team. Yet there is doubt in my mind that we really pay enough attention to the individual.

We all agree that we need to fit the man properly to the job, but the jokes about malassignments persist. So something is wrong somewhere. While the extent of the problem varies among units, fundamentally it results from the fact that we make too many assumptions about individuals and tend to regard them as coming from the same "lump of clay." My experience with organizations has convinced me that our knowledge of the individual is largely superficial and that those individuals in leadership positions typically make only token efforts to learn what an individual believes is important to him.

But it is only with such knowledge that we can ever hope to develop truly effective organizations, because this kind of knowledge is basic to any true job assignment. More often than not, though, we seem to stuff men into jobs in much the same way we stuff a turkey. We just want to fill all the holes, tidy it up, and secure it. Then we stick the bird in the oven, set the timer, and forget it until it's done. How many units have we cooked in the same way, I wonder?

We cannot please everyone, nor should we try. But we certainly can try for a better match between man and job and machine than we usually end up with. We can get good performance from a soldier only if that soldier "fits" his job, both technically and psychologically. Can't we at least recognize his personal needs and desires in the assignment process?

We say that we are concerned about performance and what motivates it. It will never happen as we expect it to unless we make a genuine effort to accommodate personal and unit "desires" more effectively. *Never should we take an individual for granted.*

### Identifying and Changing Attitudes

Changing attitudes goes directly with concentrating on the individual, for if we handle the assignment task properly we will already have taken a major step toward positively influencing individual attitudes. Every job in

an organization is accomplished through the combination of two critical factors: technical skill (the ability to do it) and the application of that skill (a willingness to use that skill).

To have an effective unit, each member should know the organization's goals, should identify with them, and should commit himself to their fulfillment within his area of responsibility. Thus, we have to make sure the goals are known, understood, and, ultimately, accepted, before anything can happen.

Leaders have the chore of trying to provide the appropriate motivational climate within their units to stimulate the soldiers to perform in the desired manner. One of the first steps the leaders must take on this long, long trail is to find out what the attitudes of the individual soldiers in the units are and how these attitudes might be affecting their present job performance. The idea is to develop appropriate incentives in the individual soldiers so that effective teamwork will develop. It is worthwhile here to remember that what is an incentive for one of them may not automatically be an incentive for another. Of course, there cannot be a hundred different incentives for a unit of a hundred men. What a leader needs to do is to work out a sensible blend of incentives to fit his unit's circumstances.

### SUMMARY

Leadership is an art, not a science. Leadership, though, can and should call upon science for help in solving technical problems. Leadership practices can be learned and improved upon by study and application. Like an aspiring painter, a novice leader can learn much from observing a master in action. He can also learn from reading about the exploits and writings of others.

Finally, those in leadership positions must never forget their tasks of training, educating, and developing others who are in their charge. Unfortunately, there are some leaders in the Army who conclude that this task is the sole responsibility of the various service schools. This idea must be overcome, and leaders must be impressed with the realization that they must assume *personal responsibility for and become personally involved* in such developmental activities.

Trying to get this message across to his subordinate commanders is one of the most difficult tasks a company or a battalion commander faces. Rote observance of a training schedule will never do it. As Will Rogers advised us years ago, "It's not what you pay a man that counts, but what he costs you."



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 in Europe.