



COMMAND AND LEADERSHIP

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General George S. Patton, Jr., once said, "Leadership is the thing that wins battles. . . but I'll be damned if I can define it?" Indeed, the successful practice of the art of command is so closely related to the personality of the leader, the characteristics of his unit, and the nature of the mission that

we should remain skeptical of anyone peddling laundry lists of "universal truths" on the subject.

When studying leadership, it's often helpful to separate what Stanford University Professor James March calls the *plumbing* (the technical skills) from the *poetry* (let's say, for

lack of a precise term, the motivative or "people" skills). Our Army does an admirable job of teaching the technical skills to officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) through formal, progressive schooling and highly sophisticated unit training. Today, those who are entrusted with the responsibility for leading soldiers can rarely, if ever, claim they lack the technical competence. Moreover, superiors and subordinates alike generally give leaders some room in which to develop their plumbing expertise by trial and error. A newly assigned platoon leader who has nothing to learn tactically should be made a company commander instead.

On the other hand, the poetry of leadership remains difficult to define. Being highly dependent on its context, it is not easily taught. Nevertheless, it must be practiced, and reasonably well, immediately upon assuming command. The leader's every pronouncement of his ends and means and his every contact with his subordinates create and sustain what we know as the command climate.

In this article, I want to discuss some of the particulars of the poetry that are relevant to commanders and leaders within a battalion. Assuming that the general principles are well-understood, I will examine instead some techniques that officers and NCOs may find helpful as they go about the critical leader task of getting soldiers to accomplish the mission.

Specifically, I will offer some thoughts on how leaders might structure and improve some of the more important ways of influencing those under their charge. These include the following:

- Completing officer and NCO efficiency reports.
- Using (and abusing) standing operation procedures (SOPs).
- Creating meaningful opportunities to get to know subordinates and communicate with them individually.
- Selecting the proper means of transmitting instructions and orders.
- Creating an environment in which "getting better" takes precedence over "looking good."
- Publishing a command philosophy.

This is, admittedly, a random assortment of topics. Nevertheless, the reader will still find this approach useful if he bears in mind that my intent is not to talk in terms of grand leadership theory but to focus on practical approaches to some very real daily command challenges and problems.

If we regard the poetry aspect of leadership as a form of art, what follows might be regarded as a somewhat loose essay giving advice on the selection of paints and brushes:

Efficiency Reports. There can be little doubt in the field that accurately written officer and NCO efficiency reports have a tremendous effect on the long-term health of the Army, the career prospects of the individuals, and the morale among the leaders of a unit. Volumes have been published on the mechanics of preparing efficiency reports. Unfortunately, less emphasis has been placed on efficiency report counselling.

Many leaders tend to sign, seal, and deliver personnel reports without ever discussing the contents with those con-

cerned. The common excuse is lack of time; a better explanation is probably that most are uncomfortable with telling a subordinate face-to-face how he measures up. Surprisingly, the desire to avoid direct confrontation often prevails, regardless of the evaluation rendered. If a report correctly reflects substandard or even average achievement, a leader may find it tough to look that person in the eye and state the facts. If the report has been inflated, a leader usually wants to avoid the professional dissonance that comes from telling a mediocre soldier he is a superstar. Similarly, the leader is uneasy with efforts to tell the real workhorses and thoroughbreds they are well-regarded and being appropriately rewarded when it is common knowledge in the unit that he has never met a subordinate he didn't think was a "top block."

The moral of all this should be apparent. A rater or senior rater must always formally counsel a subordinate before sending forward an efficiency report. The following procedure is recommended:

First, schedule the counselling session several days in advance. This gives both the (senior) rater and the ratee a chance to organize their thoughts. Discussions on efficiency reports are far too serious to become casual ("Come on in . . . I have something I want to talk about") affairs.

Second, begin the session by allowing the subordinate to read the completed report carefully and then bring any mistakes to your attention. This yields two benefits: the possibility of surprise (not a virtue in this case) is eliminated, and any lingering grammatical and typographical errors are often discovered before it's too late.

Third, a senior rater, when counselling junior officers, should complete his potential-block rating in their presence and tell them what his profile looks like at the time the reports are closed out. I'm not optimistic that such a recommendation will ever be put into practice. To do so would either end evaluation report inflation or force senior raters to admit that inflation is a way of life in their commands. Neither outcome would be palatable to most commanders or senior staff officers.

Still, for those who do elect to do business this way, there is much to be gained. Such a methodology imposes some control on inflationary tendencies (a commander doesn't like the thought of telling an extraordinary platoon leader he's a "one-block"—just like 38 out of the other 40 lieutenants rated to date). Moreover, through such an open approach, senior raters are setting an example for their junior officers to be up front in their leadership style and not to duck controversy. It is hypocritical for a senior leader who is unwilling to discuss his profile directly with a subordinate ever to claim that this same subordinate is unwilling to take responsibility for his actions.

Fourth, the substance of the counselling session should be the rater's comments on the areas the rated officer should sustain or improve upon. The latter should apply even to the best and the brightest, as we are in the business of always striving for excellence. Such counselling can be done well only with some advance homework, since specifics are powerful

medicine (for example, "On the air assault operation during the June battalion external evaluation, I noted . . ."). At the same time, the rater should consider directing the subordinate to include one or more of the "needs improvement" items he identifies on the subsequent support form.

Fifth and finally, after completing his portion of the efficiency report, the rater should schedule an appointment with the senior rater to discuss his evaluation. The rater should personally provide the senior rater with an approved support form, his rater input, and a concise, well-thought-out verbal summary of his assessment of the rated individual. Moreover, he should offer his judgment, based upon his

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knowledge of the senior rater's "track record," of how his superior should go about completing his own portion of the rating. If a senior rater is not open to such an initiative (most are), at least, a handwritten note from the rater to the senior rater attached to the efficiency report can capture the essence of what has just been described.

On the other hand, senior raters should require those under their charge serving as raters to comply with the above procedures when submitting efficiency reports. When such a system is adopted, leaders are forced to take personnel reports more seriously, develop a greater sense of responsibility for their subordinates, and think one level higher.

Standing Operating Procedures. Contrary to what some leaders believe, there is no positive correlation between the volume and density of a unit's SOPs and its combat readiness. If anything, the relationship may be a negative one. We need to bear in mind that both tactical and administrative SOPs are devised to facilitate command and control, as well as to allow the practitioner to concentrate on the novel aspects of a situation. SOPs are not an end in themselves.

Those who, upon assuming command, spend hours fretting over an absence of explicit rules are usually wasting valuable time over precious little. *A War and Peace*-length motor pool SOP, for instance, often tells us little that isn't already made clear in official publications and divisional directives. Is a battalion such a complex organization that chapters need to be written governing motor stables? Articulating standards (mission guidance) is essential; but telling NCOs in painful detail how to achieve such standards only encourages rigidity and an emphasis on compliance and stifles attempts to nurture initiative and an innovative spirit.

Admittedly, certain SOPs are required by regulation (physical security, for example). And certain processes are so clearly superior (in terms of safety, outcomes) that leaders are correct in codifying them as rules or SOPs. Given the daily flux of training schedules, however—as well as our need

to produce thinking, resourceful junior leaders—we are best advised to keep formal SOPs to a minimum, while clarifying the expected standards. Although a high-performing unit does have prescribed ways of doing business at any given time, the rules will be internalized and dynamic.

But we should distinguish between counterproductive SOPs and rules that are established to improve discipline and cohesiveness. Policies that emphasize compliance with certain standards of appearance or conduct designed to further the unit's sense of collective identity are fundamental to group success. A leader taking charge should be concerned if no one has answers to the seemingly mundane questions of the established physical training uniform, the motto soldiers should say when saluting, the rules concerning the wearing of the kevlar helmet in the field, and so on. These constitute the "who we are" rules that make a company a family, determined to stand together. Such policies are not as "rational" or "scientific" as a maintenance SOP that tells the soldier how to dispatch a vehicle, but they are ultimately much more important to our success in combat.

To summarize, leaders should set standards, then get out and help subordinates attain those standards. Codifying them in elegant prose is not a wise expenditure of mental energy. Von Moltke's famous expression, "No plan survives contact with the enemy," is instructive. Within a battalion, commanders should write down things that pass the common-sense test by which we evaluate the utility of SOPs, and then publish in concise form those few policies that help mold the unit's personality in the image they seek. To go much beyond is to risk infusing a combat unit with an administrative spirit.

Finding Opportunities to Get to Know Subordinates. The adage "know your subordinates" is easily said but not so easily done. Leaders have tremendous demands on their time. They are often consumed with meetings, heavily involved with training (if not, they should be), fighting fires, and hopefully reserving time for their families. Undistracted moments are rare, and distracted moments are not conducive to the kind of relaxed setting that promotes candor and understanding. It's ironic that squad leaders are often

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criticized for not knowing their soldiers, while little thought is given to the need for a more senior leader to get to know his subordinates.

We should say at the outset that leaders should choose the proper place and time. Maintenance is discussed during motor stables and marksmanship at the weapons qualification range; these are not appropriate times and places in which to ask about personal matters, except under unusual circumstances. By remaining absolutely focused on the task

at hand, leaders help create a no-nonsense, highly professional approach to unit training.

How, then, do we solve the problem? I can suggest three possibilities:

First, a leader might invite subordinates individually to breakfast or lunch in the dining facility. Leaders should periodically eat in the dining facility, of course, and it's good for soldiers to see their officers and NCOs doing so. Beyond this, however, a meal shared with a subordinate provides a 45-minute uninterrupted occasion for one-on-one conversation. Much can be learned about a subordinate personally and professionally if a leader encourages him to open up.

Second, a leader might have a subordinate accompany him on a visit to the field and, with both sitting in the rear seats of the vehicle, use the travel time to talk. For example, a battalion command sergeant major might have the S-2 NCO in charge join him for a trip to the field to observe scout platoon training. The time on the road and in the woods will be productive for both.

A third suggestion is to take advantage of social gatherings, but there are some limitations here. First, when subordinates are brought together, a leader should concentrate on building camaraderie and not spend undue time with any one person. Second, if the soldiers' spouses, relatives, and friends are present, the leader needs to spend time expressing his appreciation for their support and letting them know their husbands, sons, or friends are doing a good job. Lastly, while leaders can invite subordinates and their spouses to their homes, such an environment doesn't facilitate professional communication. Moreover, if the number of guests is limited to improve the chances for deeper conversation, a leader might spend most of his time (and that of his family) entertaining separate groups. In brief, social get-togethers help build teams, but they shouldn't be considered a substitute for finding ways to really get to know subordinates.

A final note concerning one-on-one opportunities with subordinates. Doing a bit of advanced mental preparation is helpful. Leaders shouldn't show up without an agenda. A few minutes of reflection on the subordinates' personal and

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career matters, informal counselling matters, and issues upon which his advice and feedback are sought will ensure excellent returns on the investment of time. (It's embarrassing not to recall the name of a soldier's spouse, or the fact he was just selected for promotion.)

Transmitting Orders and Instructions. We know that leaders who remain prisoners of their command bunkers or tactical operations center have little, if any, grasp of their unit's actual situation. Written instructions and structured

briefings have their place in communicating a commander's orders and intent. But they only supplement leading from the front; they don't replace it.

The more routine and administrative the process, the more a leader can (and should) rely on written or electronic communications. Most of the staff transactions within units fall into this category (awards, efficiency reports, clearances, ammunition requests, inventories). On the other hand, the more context-specific the process—or the more uncertain a leader is of the best way to achieve the desired result—the more he should orchestrate action from somewhere outside his headquarters.

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To illustrate, let's consider after-action reviews (AARs). A commander should have very specific ideas of how he wants AARs conducted within his unit—site selection, format, visual aids, attendees; the list of inputs is not a short one. When we consider the number of variables—size of the unit, live or blank fire exercise, terrain, time available, and so on—it should become obvious that libraries could be filled on the subject, and even then without exhausting all of the possibilities.

A well-planned officer and NCO professional development class (including a demonstration) is a starting point. But the AAR is an art form that can be improved upon only through practice. A commander or senior NCO who devotes time in the field to carefully observing AARs, and then critiques, coaches, or even interjects to teach by example, is communicating that which simply cannot be transmitted effectively on paper.

In a sense, office automation has been a mixed blessing for combat units. Clearly, it has improved staff productivity in the performance of the routine tasks referred to earlier (although it has also generated a demand for more and more information). At the same time, it has led some commanders to feel they can effectively lead from a work station, engaging in what we once called "management by memorandum?" But computers don't give us bad news, let us know our standards cannot be attained (or are being ignored for lack of supervision), or challenge our authority.

Unless a leader is vigilant, computers are also addictive. If commanders, staff principals, first sergeants, or junior leaders are seen in front of monitors for more than a few minutes a day when "real" soldiers are outside their offices trying to accomplish (or perhaps avoid) real things, with real resources, something is seriously wrong. The terminal is the place of duty of the supply or prescribed load list specialist, not an experienced leader. If leaders feel compelled to type away, a computer is a timesaver, but it should be used after duty hours or on weekends. A command that gets this wrong

in garrison will almost certainly have a “bunker” mentality in the field.

“Getting Better” and “Looking Good.” Two of the most vexing problems a leader faces are these:

- How does he continually encourage better performance without seeming unappreciative of what is being done well?
- How does he react to visits from higher level commanders and outsiders?

The two problems are related. If, in addressing the first, a commander tries to establish a climate in which subordinates are honest and don’t engage in “show and tell,” he will be accused of being disingenuous when he tries to put on a spectacle in confronting the second.

Like all leadership problems, there are no completely satisfactory or universal solutions. But if a commander spends much of his time with his subordinates and soldiers getting an accurate appraisal of the situation—enforcing, mentoring, and encouraging—the first problem will often take care of itself. There are several reasons this is so.

First, if the mortar platoon leader and sergeant, for instance, are accustomed to having the battalion commander show up in the middle of night live fire exercises, or when they discover him riding with a gun squad during a displacement, his appearance does not engender the fear of failure or uneasiness that might otherwise result. The leader who gets out and observes continually will not be unduly influenced by the inevitable off-days, and subordinates will instinctively know this.

Second, if leaders make it clear that the name of the game is to discuss (as professionals who belong to the same team) what is going right and what is going wrong, then subor-

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dinates will not be inclined to conceal shortcomings—provided, of course, that the “basics” have been attended to (field discipline is being enforced, training has been thought out, etc.).

Returning to the mortar platoon example, if the battalion commander observes a live-fire exercise for several hours and then sits down with the platoon leader and platoon sergeant for 30 minutes and gets their assessment of what needs to be done, provides his own critique of strengths and weaknesses, and encourages them to discuss what resources they need to better accomplish the mission, he’s helping foster a collective desire to win on the day of the game, not just to look good at practice. On the other hand, a once-a-year blitzkrieg visit to the mortar platoon in which all is declared to be in disarray after five minutes (with the mortar platoon leader given no opportunity to explain any of the

numerous problems or conflicting priorities that detracted from the observed outcomes) only contributes to poor morale, an unwillingness to take risks, and a desire to hide things.

Third, if a commander sets a tone of formally and informally sharing with his junior leaders what seems to be working and what doesn’t (again, we’re not talking about the basics), they will quickly pick up on the fact that he’s committed to excellence in the long-run, not just to responding to what he considers his own boss’s priority of the moment. In any event, a commander must serve as the focal point of the dissemination of lessons learned; it is unrealistic to assume that subordinates will have the time or the generosity to fully inform those on their left and right.

During these sessions, a leader must avoid sarcasm and disparaging humor when relating difficulties others have encountered. Such attitudes will easily be misconstrued as criticism, and the message “We don’t fail in this unit” will quickly spread. Leaders must carefully distinguish between a failure to observe fundamentals of discipline and basic soldiering (operator maintenance not being performed in the field, for example) and a failure to attain a training standard (the reason the unit is in the field to begin with). The former should be dealt with swiftly and severely in private. The latter should generate enthusiastic and open discussion and an exchange of opinion that will lead to a determination to do it better the next time around. A leader who can promote such a spirit within his unit will create a team of professionals dedicated to excellence.

This still leaves us, however, with the problem of how to respond to visits from higher headquarters and outsiders. Of course, if a leader’s own superiors have emphasized substance over form—frequently getting out, confronting reality, and exhorting and cajoling—the solution is “business as normal.” But this is not always the case. Moreover, there is the occasional “Do not fail” VIP visit. We’re not interested in having, say, the Russian Minister of Defense learn from the mortar platoon leader about the influence class I and other problems had on the abysmal performance just witnessed. The best recommendation that can be offered is for the responsible commander to decide early how much margin for error is acceptable and then to be absolutely aboveboard with his subordinates about what is expected and why.

It’s truly regrettable if a leader’s senior commander leaves his headquarters only once or twice a year to observe unit training. Nevertheless, if this is the reality, the leader should be wary of entrusting his unit’s reputation to fate. Under such circumstances, prudence is entirely rational, instead of simply self-serving. He must think about the possible consequences for any subordinates observed having a bad day, or about the time that will be spent explaining why the entire unit was having a bad day. I don’t mean to imply this phenomenon is commonplace in our Army. It isn’t. But it can be expected to occur at least once in the course of anyone’s career, and no commander should deny its existence.

It may be best to conclude this section by remarking that any commander who has held his post for more than six months and still finds that subordinates seem to freeze when he shows up at training is overdue for some introspection. Either he's not out enough and is still regarded as an oddity when he does appear, or he's perceived as being interested only in tearing down and not building up.

Command Philosophies. The expectation that every newly assigned commander will compose his "philosophy of command" is relatively new in the Army. We survived for

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many years without this requirement, but, whether or not a commander likes writing his philosophy is beside the point; it isn't optional. That being the case, we should at least make the most of it.

First, it should be brief. Anything much over one or two pages simply won't be read. I once glanced at one battalion commander's command philosophy that was 15 pages long. It was about as exciting as a book on the civil statutes of Jersey City and probably less widely read.

Second, a commander should identify and talk about the two, three, or possibly four things that he sees as the distinguishing features of his command. The predictable list of the thousand things a commander should do well reflects no imagination, or no vision, or both. Thinking about great college or professional coaches may be helpful. When we hear the name of a famous college basketball coach, we im-

mediately have an image of, say, commitment to academics, tenacious defense, and team ball. Certainly we don't normally recall such "stirring" platitudes as "Coach X's ethics are nonnegotiable" or "Coach X is a real equal-opportunity employer." In other words, keep the fluff out of a command philosophy.

Third, and related to the second point, a leader should make sure he knows his own priorities before committing himself in writing, lest his philosophy become an object of cynicism among his subordinates. If everything is to be a priority, he should say, "High performing units do everything well" (I'd disagree but would at least appreciate my boss's honesty.) If training excellence is to be a leader's lodestar, he should make this clear. But he should be truthful.

Finally, he must be realistic. We all want to accomplish great things, but the world is full of obstacles and constraints. A well-written command philosophy must reflect the art of the *possible*.

Both the plumbing and the poetry of leadership are essential to successful command. Yet it is the latter that makes the difference between a marginal unit and an outstanding one. Whether or not any of the random thoughts discussed here are regarded as useful is a matter of personal taste. But I hope officers, NCOs, and prospective leaders have at least been reminded that we need to give serious thought to the form our poetry takes.

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