

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Understanding People The Key to Successful Leadership

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The late General Creighton Abrams defined a key element of leadership when he said, "The Army isn't made up of people, the Army *is* people." Throughout history, successful leaders have applied this philosophy in a variety of ways, and the one common denominator in their success has been knowing their soldiers and understanding the factors that motivate them.

Motivation is a term that can mean many things to many people; to some, it is a function of positive reinforcement and is achieved through praise, rewards, or the prestige that comes with increased responsibility. To others, the fear of punishment or other forms of negative reinforcement will motivate a soldier to do his best. History offers countless examples of both approaches to motivation and of the success or failure that resulted from each.

Psychologist Abraham H. Maslow argued that human needs could be categorized within five levels. They are, in descending order: the need for self-actualization, ego needs, social needs, safety needs, and physiological needs. Self-actualization—the desire to achieve the full potential of one's energies and talents—includes personal development and growth, creativity, and self-realization. The ego needs include self-esteem and the esteem of

others; the former includes perceptions of one's own competence, adequacy, and power, while the latter relates to such things as one's status within society, the extent to which one is respected, and the prestige and recognition one enjoys.

According to Maslow, the social needs relate to acceptance and include such intangible factors as love, friendship, and a sense of belonging to a

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group or team. Those categorized as safety needs include not only safety from injury and violence but also financial security. Finally, the physiological needs address such issues as food, water, shelter, sleep, and even sexual fulfillment. Obviously, the perceived importance of these needs may differ from one person to another; in some individuals, one need—the need for companionship, for example—may be of very low importance, and may be supplanted by greater emphasis on another

need, but the needs that motivate us as humans generally fall within these categories.

If Maslow's hierarchy defines some of the factors that influence human behavior, how can a leader apply this information to the improvement of his unit? Given this list of needs, what will motivate men and women to excel in peace and war? Those who strive to become better leaders will immediately see that the Army makes it fairly easy to meet at least some of a soldier's social, safety, and physiological needs, since soldiers are members of a team, receive regular paychecks and recognition, and are generally well sheltered, get adequate sleep, and eat well. It remains, therefore, to address the needs of self-actualization and esteem as the dominant motivators of those in uniform. But how do we do that?

If followed, a number of guidelines (see box) will enable a leader to gain the support of soldiers and provide the motivation needed to ensure mission accomplishment.

First, demand the best of your soldiers at all times. Setting high standards provides the direction that any unit needs, and it gives soldiers the opportunity to meet or exceed those standards. Make sure the men and women of the unit understand that their best ef-

GUIDELINES

- Set and enforce high standards, and ensure that soldiers know you expect their best effort on each and every task.
- Give soldiers responsibility; they thrive on it.
- Treat everyone with the same dignity and respect that you expect others to exercise when dealing with you.
- Gain your soldiers' respect and confidence by being proficient in your job and showing by your actions that you are concerned for their welfare.
- Remember that leading and commanding are not necessarily the same thing; both work best when applied together.

fort is good enough, but you must set clear, unequivocal goals against which effort can be measured. The late Major General Aubrey S. Newman said, "A man's best is good enough for me." This is a good philosophy so long as all concerned agree on the definition of best. If the soldier knows that best efforts are what is most important, and that a leader values this effort above all else, this encourages personal growth and self-respect, and will earn the esteem of others.

Second, almost all soldiers thrive on responsibility; give it to them, and watch the results. The knowledge that you expect their best, coupled with the responsibility to do the job their way, will encourage initiative, creativity, and personal growth. As General George S.

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Patton put it: "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity." Allowing soldiers to use their own abilities and talents in this way will enable them to realize their potential and allow them to enjoy the self-esteem,

respect of others, and even the positive recognition—in the form of promotion and awards—that come from a job well done.

A third principle is that a leader must take a personal interest in the welfare and safety of every soldier, both on and off duty. A soldier who is treated with the dignity and respect he deserves will respond with loyalty to the unit and its commander. Likewise, a leader who is proficient in his job will have taken a long step toward earning the trust of the members of the unit; this is one of the most powerful of motivating factors, because it means that the soldiers in his care are likely to subordinate their own needs and desires to those of the organization. Once they have become team players, the goals of the team become the priority, and that is what mission accomplishment is all about.

In the hierarchy of needs, trust and confidence promote the self-esteem and the self-actualization that are necessary for the tremendous sacrifices that soldiers are often called upon to make, even risking life and limb for the sake of mission accomplishment. Trust and confidence are instilled by competent and capable leaders, and no soldier trusts a leader who doesn't know his job. Assuming, however, that a leader is technically proficient, what is that elusive quality that will engender trust among subordinates? More than anything, I believe it is a genuine liking for people that the leader communicates by word and—most important—deed that will earn their trust. Men and women know instinctively whether someone likes them or not, and they can also spot a phony a mile away. The most genuinely caring leaders are often those who do not make a great show of their concern, but who amply demonstrate it by taking an interest in their soldiers' careers, families, problems, health, and welfare.

An important element of the leader's concern is the example he sets. Leading by example is certainly not a new concept, but it is as relevant today as it was at Valley Forge. A leader whose decisions are based upon selfless motives will have the credibility that is essential

to success. He must be willing to suffer the same privations and undergo the same hardships as his men, and he must be willing to forego popularity, choosing instead to do what is right. An example of this is tough, realistic training; a commander may be tempted to lower training standards, thinking such a

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measure will improve morale, when in fact the opposite result is more likely. Soldiers know when they—and you—are cutting corners, and they also realize the consequences of going into combat unprepared. A leader who succumbs to temptation and adopts such a policy is not taking care of his men.

General Newman wrote in 1967: "Leadership is the art of inspiring a desire in men's hearts to do what you want them to do; command is the knack of making them do what you want them to do." The keys to successful leadership are understanding what motivates people, setting and enforcing high standards, and taking care of your soldiers. It may have taken a psychologist to define the five categories of human needs, but the intuitive understanding of motivation has guided successful leaders for centuries, and has often decided the fate of nations.

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