

The Leading Manager

COLONEL RICHARD L. STRUBE, JR., U.S. Army, Retired

Are you a leader, or are you a manager? This question has rolled around in the minds of Army officers and non-commissioned officers for years, yet there is still no clear-cut answer. Sometimes the answer is *almost* found in one's job title: platoon leader, squad leader, company commander, team leader. But other titles give virtually no clue: platoon sergeant, first sergeant, division signal officer. Certainly most would agree that a title containing the term "commander" connotes leadership, yet commanders at all levels are evaluated on management skills and measures as much as on leadership skills—and sometimes perhaps more on management. So, do these terms mean the same and are they therefore interchangeable? What are the distinctions, and where are they found?

There are some clues in the professional development process, especially as it relates to the Officer and NCO Education Systems. There are the Primary Leadership Development Course, the Command and General Staff Officers Course, the Army Logistics Management College, and even an Organizational Leadership for Executives Course. But there are also the Basic NCO Course, the Advanced NCO Course, the Officer Advanced Courses, the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, and the Army War College. None of those use either *management* or *leadership* in their titles. You are taught to be an "advanced NCO" or an "advanced officer," whatever those are.

It is almost as though there is a deliberate effort to keep the waters muddy on

these terms. Interestingly enough, all these schools, and others, teach *both* management skills and leadership skills. The Army's extensive formal schools system begs another different but related question: Are leaders born, or are they taught? What about managers? Some will argue that there are several core, basic leadership skills that seem to



be part of one's personality, in the genes so to speak. Leadership training serves to hone those skills and develop others, but it is difficult to fully assess what it is that marks "natural" leaders.

Most would probably agree that management skills are easier to teach, that they lend themselves more to an academic discipline, and that it is possible to train a poor manager to be a much more effective manager. That is not necessarily true of leadership, however. But some strong leaders may never be

effective managers, and there is some evidence that they may not achieve the same career success as those who are proven managers.

It can be argued that the higher a soldier's rank, the more important management skills are to his career. This may be because leadership is more closely related to the personal interactions between leaders and their soldiers, and the more senior the person, the less opportunity there may be to demonstrate leadership. An interesting variant on this, however, is what I call Leadership Tiering. A division commander may be seen as a strong leader to the brigade and battalion commanders—those subordinates who operate within the senior "tier" of the division—but his impact may be almost negligible to those at lower tiers. Most privates in a rifle company have no concept that the reason they are winning the fight is that their commanding general is providing the tools and conditions required for success. To them they are winning because they have a great *company* commander and an awesome platoon sergeant and because they are confident in their training. The fact that the commanding general managed a superb training program, or that the division support commander managed a superb logistics and maintenance program, has no relevance. At the battalion level, the tier is different, and a company commander who cannot manage a good company supply program may still be seen as a superb leader by soldiers who look to him for other things.

When a unit is in the attack and is

meeting strong resistance, it is leadership that gets it onto the objective. When the unit is consolidating and rearming and repairing vehicles and eating meals, it is management that makes those essentials happen. Of course, the S-4 may have had to fight a battle to get the logistics package to the front, and he may have had to exert strong leadership to get tired and wounded and hungry soldiers to overcome a number of obstacles in getting the trains forward.

Thus it seems that it may be virtually impossible to separate leadership from management. One way to view it may be that planning is management and execution is leadership, but even that definition does not cover all the nuances. The soldiers in a unit that has conducted a successful attack see their leadership tier as perhaps one or two echelons above them—maybe to the battalion commander. Instinctively, they know that they were led to victory by an inspiring, up-front captain or lieutenant colonel who was leading them to defeat the enemy. They know that after they win the fight and seize the objective the wounded will be evacuated, they will get more ammunition, their equipment will be repaired, they will eat, and they will get some rest. They know this because their leader has told them he will do those things. The fact that it is the management of combat service support actions that makes those things happen has no relevance in their life at that moment. The battalion and brigade commanders feel the same confidence that the division commander will provide the resources they need to continue the battle because they know he is a superb manager of division operations.

While leadership may be viewed by tiers, management is not so position dependent. Soldiers in a signal platoon or in a truck company may not fully understand what management is and the effect it has on them and their ability to perform their jobs, but they know that a lot of what happens around them is the result of management practices. They know that every soldier in the unit has housing, receives medical care, and gets paid regularly. They know that spare parts are provided, ammunition is is-

sued as needed, and they will rotate cycles of intensive training with cycles of “housekeeping” activities. That food is available in the dining facility is a given—it is management that provides it. It is leadership that brings hot coffee and soup to the vehicle wash rack at 2300.

The Army manages a complex and sophisticated retention program designed to make sure the force gets the right soldiers with the right skills at the right grades. The unit with good leadership re-enlists those soldiers, achieving the management goals.

It is apparent that while leadership and management have different definitions in the dictionary, they are intertwined in such a manner that a successful, effective leader who both accomplishes his missions and takes care of his soldiers must use both. A good

That food is available in the dining facility is a given—it is management that provides it. It is leadership that brings hot coffee and soup to the vehicle wash rack at 2300.

commander manages an effective safety program. A good leader ensures that his soldiers are not hurt in accidents. Analyzing accident data, writing a safety policy, and inspecting for hazardous conditions are part of safety management. Enforcing the policy, training the soldiers, and eliminating the hazardous condition are part of leadership. Strong leadership coupled with sound management will almost certainly lead to better units. Commanders and leaders at all levels need to do both in order to maximize their influence.

As a soldier matures and develops and progresses up the ranks, the differences between leadership and management will become less clear; the gray areas will overlap the clear distinctions between them that may exist at certain times or under certain circumstances. There is more gray at the division tier than at the battalion tier. The more successful leaders may be those who are

able to understand the distinctions and then provide either more management or more leadership in a particular situation and environment. A good manager can write superb plans and policies, but without proper leadership those plans will remain ideas and concepts on paper, not actions taken. The Chief of Staff of the Army is certainly a leader, but it is his management skills that enable him to perform his duties effectively. General George Patton was certainly a superb manager, but he is remembered for his powerful leadership in war.

The debate (if one considers the topic debatable) will almost certainly continue because it is virtually impossible to put either leadership or management into a neat package and call it a “stand-alone” process. The two are essentially inseparable. Leaders will always have to manage, and managers will frequently be called upon to lead. The distinctions between the two may be more pronounced at the junior officer and NCO levels, at the lower echelon tiers of an organization, because resolving the issues and events commonly encountered there generally requires more direct interaction between leader and subordinate. Squad and platoon leaders need to focus on doing those things that lead to mission accomplishment while providing for the welfare of their soldiers. Strong management skills are more essential to field grade officers and senior NCOs than to company grade officers and middle-grade NCOs. The very best infantry platoon sergeants I ever observed considered themselves leaders, and they invested all of their time and professionalism in leading. However one wants to define these terms, there can be no real debate that they must be used simultaneously in order for commanders, and their units, to be the best they can be.

Colonel Richard L. Strube, Jr., was commissioned through Infantry Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning and served in a variety of command, staff, and leadership positions throughout his 27-year career. He was assigned to the office of an Assistant Secretary of the Army before his retirement in 1995 and is now a management consultant.
