

## Lead up and lead down

Sparks, Nevada – The Army is an institution built on leadership. There are job titles at the lowest levels of combat formations that have the word leader in them: Team Leader, Squad Leader, and Platoon Leader. Leader positions after the platoon level are bound to command and positional authority. At higher levels, toxicity begins to rear its ugly head. These changes are largely a matter of individual personality, learned behavior, and personal experience. The toxic leader who succeeds typically remains toxic until he or she is eventually derailed. This begs the question: is the leader focused on the success of the organization or his or her personal success?

We serve in an Institution that has tolerated the opposing Credo: “Take care of soldiers” and Toxic Leadership. How can these philosophical mandates exist in the same sphere? Does the individual leader lead for the troops or to ensure personal success? James Hunter cracked this code in his seminal work Servant where he asked, “What is your leadership style?” Volume is not a leadership trait, neither is fear. Yet they remain primary tools for some leaders. Not because the leader is a “bad actor”, but rather because poor leadership techniques that create results are often tolerated.

The caricature of the toxic commander storming around demanding excellence is well known. Blowing in, disrupting the flow, exerting influence, threatening and demanding are daily events in some units. Nobody gives much notice to this leader. Keeping your head down and pressing forward is the key to success with this leader. The environment where this leader flourishes is at a meeting or briefing. Positional authority safeguards the leader and not the led. The leader who uses positional authority leads for personal gain without regard for those who do the heavy lifting. These leaders are often seen standing in the rubble of the organizations that they are leaving.

The focus here is not to rant about “mean” leaders, but to discuss the very essence of leadership. Good leaders can seamlessly meld leadership and commandship into a personality that can demand excellence and create a level of devotion to both leader and organization like that of the French Foreign Legion. Who are these leaders and how do they garner the love and devotion of large organizations?

They lead up and down. Leadership is not a single task that uses a checklist and must be accomplished for a period of time between staff jobs and military schools. Being a leader shapes the leader’s conduct and sets the conditions that drive the entire unit. From there the formation will often

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begin to mirror the good leader and even take on some behavioral and speech traits. “When they start to talk like their leader, the leader is truly in charge”.

1. Sound leaders not only manage and control their assigned formations, but they set the conditions for relations with the next level of leaders. How the boss views and treats the subordinate unit is a function of the relationship between the two leaders. Both have specific responsibilities, but the sub-unit leader must bring the A-game to every meeting with the boss. Simply being in charge buys no sway when in the Boss’s meeting or briefing. This is not the place for defiance or belligerence. Leading up is a game of savvy, skill, and timing.
2. In a hierarchical institution like the Army, commanders have been selected and believe they are “chosen.” The art and science of commandship is tricky. Commandship allows weak leaders to “Lead” from on high at the expense of the subordinate leaders. These Commanders generally are found in hostile and toxic environments. Open combat with these personalities is not only divisive, but also fruitless and is terminal in many cases. Belligerent behavior in these conditions will simply marginalize the leader and, by extension, the unit.
3. Be a master of your craft. Leading up is putting the best face on the task. Be prepared for every meeting and briefing. Use data to campaign your subordinate units; exceed every standard. The unit knows and expects the support of the leadership. Never forget that “Joe” knows what is going on. This is not the place to “bet your bars”. Senseless, self-destructive behavior makes for good stories, but not longevity. There will be personality conflict; be prepared for it and conduct yourself accordingly. It is not always fair; it is the real world.
4. Be, Know, Do! These words can be found on countless posters in training venues throughout the training base. They are the foundation of the entire NCO Corps. This is simple in concept and difficult in application; be the soldier you expect your soldiers to be.
5. Speak the truth in all things. The truth is a constant. It is black and white. It is hard and often painful. Own your faults and mistakes; learn from them. Soldiers want the truth; they yearn for it for they are often bombarded with the institutional propaganda that dribbles down

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from on high. Why did “Take care of Soldiers” become so popular in the Army some years ago? Because it was a common practice in the Institution? Because Leaders and Commanders were leading down - no! But, like many slogans in the Army, the longer it was uttered, the more it became ground truth.

Leaders in the Army have been chosen and given a very special job: the care, training, and employment of a formation of American Soldiers. This is a heavy burden to shoulder. It is not about the success of the leader, but rather, the success of the unit. Leaders can ensure success; but at what expense to the soldiers? Be the leader in your mind’s eye, the leader soldiers deserve; the leader they trust! If you do that, Soldiers will offer “...the last full measure of devotion...”

Pro Patria

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