



Ten Ways Great Leaders Lead

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OVER THE PAST 19 YEARS, I have been fortunate to have served with and studied under some great officers and non-commissioned officers from whom I have gleaned the following 10 examples of excellence in leadership.

“Those fools at Platoon Headquarters!” the soldier grumbles. Substitute (whatever echelon of command you wish) and still many soldiers will say that their superiors are incompetent, misguided, or just plain dumb. Generally, the farther away the headquarters is geographically and in level of responsibility, the more vociferous are the complaints against it. True incompetents do exist, but most leaders are hard-working folks trying to do the best they can with the resources available to make their units, the Army, and the world a better place. Some policies and decisions are not good, and might even be silly, but where one stands is often determined by where one sits. Decisions at platoon headquarters might be great for the platoon but not so great for 3d Squad. The necessity for (or wisdom of) policies and decisions at one level might not be apparent at another level.

One response is to spew bile and venom at the powers-that-be. Venting one’s spleen can be a catharsis. You can appear to have far greater wisdom than those of much higher rank and greater experience and even become a prophet with a circle of devotees. This is the strategy for those who enjoy spitting into the wind. Focusing intellectual and emotional energy on something one cannot influence or control is self-defeating.

A more productive approach is to tend your own garden. Make your squad, platoon, or battalion the best place it can possibly be. Focus your talents and energies on areas you can directly influence and control. Make life better and more meaningful for those around you. Be committed to excellence in every facet of existence. Sometimes I have lousy

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neighbors, sometimes a lousy neighborhood. Nevertheless, my garden is mine to tend. How we live our lives in a moral sense is up to each one of us. The same can be said in large measure about our units: the quality of excellence is up to us.

One way of tending your garden is to pick your battles. Beyond our area of control is another area, the area of influence, which we do not control but which we can help shape. Events in the area of influence affect our gardens, but events we control in our gardens can also affect the area of influence.

Sometimes events in our areas of influence have a marginal, but annoying effect in the areas we control. Although there is little reason to stew over these effects, people do so, and eventually become like the little boy who cried wolf. Because of all the noise made making mountains out of molehills, the important issues get lost. When we complain about everything, those around us cannot decide which problems are truly important and which are merely annoying. Eventually, we become the annoyance, and what we regard as the truly important issue gets lost. Fighting everything, like attempting to be strong everywhere tactically, undermines effectiveness. The focus should be on the important battles. Your commander will appreciate that you can make the distinction, and so will your unit. You will also find that you generally “win” when you pick your battles, and so do those around you.

Those who tend their gardens discover that excellence is infectious. People want to be on winning teams, and they want to make their teams winners. Engaging in petty rivalries and jealousies is counterproductive. Do not play such silly games. Focus on excellence and those around you will follow suit. Winners contribute to their surroundings; losers complain about them. Winners are problem solvers; losers are problem identifiers. Be a winner.

If the issue or idea is bigger than your unit and chain of command, and if you have a solution that would contribute to the force as a whole, write an article and make a difference. There is no accountability in merely complaining; not much courage is required. But there is plenty of accountability when you sign your name to a journal article. Professionals respect accountability; they know the power of ideas and solutions. People who want to excel read the insights and ideas of others and use them to make themselves and their gardens better. A good article can make a difference.

Clarify Expectations and Enforce Standards

Clear expectations produce good results. People generally want to do well. When we make expectations clear, people tend to rise to the occasion to meet them. When we analyze why an individual or unit failed to accomplish what we wanted, the reason is often unclear expectations and poor guidance. Few things are more demoralizing than to believe you have done a good job, only to be told that you have completely missed the mark. Articulating expectations and having subordinates read back (the guidance) for possible correction is an excellent way to train someone. If you work for someone who provides fuzzy expectations, read back for possible correction until you know what the person wants.

Incidentally, the read-back technique works wonders in resolving what appear to be ethical dilemmas. For example, a commander once told a

lieutenant to make sure everyone in his platoon had a score on his physical training (PT) card for an upcoming inspection. One soldier did not have a current PT score because he had suffered an injury and had been in a cast for several months. The lieutenant thought the commander was implying that he should submit a fictitious score for the soldier and thus make a false statement on an official document. Even the sleaziest boss would hesitate to say, "I want you to falsify a document," or "Yes, I want you to lie, cheat, and steal." When the lieutenant asked the commander to clarify his statement, the commander told him he certainly did not want any documents falsified.

One of the best ways to clarify expectations is to enforce standards. For a "super trooper" to be treated no differently than a problem soldier is demoralizing. Why exert all that effort if no one cares? Enforcing standards demonstrates that what we say is important and what we do is consistent. Making policies that we do not enforce sends the message that standards are not important.

When enforcing standards, explain why they are important.

If discipline means doing what is right, then education is the critical component of discipline. Education helps promote ownership of Army standards. Soldiers will be far more willing to meet standards when they understand their importance and do not regard them as mere harassment.

Recognizing and rewarding good performance goes a long way toward promoting excellence. Giving people a pat on the back, a thank you, or some public recognition is important. U.S. Army General Bruce Clarke once said, "Morale is a function of knowing what you are doing is important, doing it well, and knowing it is appreciated."¹

Clarifying expectations does not mean handholding or telling people how to do their jobs. Simply express what you want done and why and then unleash your subordinates' creativity to accomplish the mission. How much guidance you give depends on the amount of trust and confidence you have in one another. Knowing what to do is knowing the letter of the law; knowing why you do it is knowing its spirit. Making the what and why clear enables subordinates to take meaningful initiatives, and they might even succeed beyond expectations.

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Set the Example

The “do as I say, not as I do” style of leadership is demoralizing and can initiate a downward spiral of loss of faith and respect between superior and subordinate. Strive to be the toughest member of the team, the best soldier in the unit, and a moral and ethical example to others. Be able to look at soldiers and say, “Do it just like I do.” You will most likely not be the best in all (or even any) categories of achievement, but soldiers will respect your commitment to excellence.

Leaders who enjoy fun and competition should try the “Gunga Din” competition, which was inspired by Rudyard Kipling’s poem of the same name.² The competition pits the leader and sponsor against everyone else in the unit in a test of skill, endurance, and toughness. One version of the game incorporates running, swimming, and marksmanship; another includes an Army physical fitness test that includes a 4-mile run and a 12-mile foot march in full field uniform with loaded rucksack. Leaders should keep a Gunga Din competition mission-focused and fun but make it a stretching experience. Pushing yourself and the unit to the limits of endurance is important in building perseverance and toughness. The amount of mutual respect and bonding such an exercise promotes is tremendous.

Managers get paid to make decisions, but leaders get paid to make decisions *and* set the example in implementing them. Leaders must be visible, share hardships, and be the best. Being with your soldiers sets a great example and demonstrates that you are a leader who cares.

Celebrate Failure

Sometimes a leader must go to extremes to get rid of zero-defects and risk-averse perceptions. The idea of celebrating failure is a bold, and fairly common, concept in the business world.³ If you do not fail routinely, then you are not pushing the envelope of ideas and technology hard enough. Although several projects might fail, some will succeed, and ideas from failed projects might help improve others. Over the long run, innovation and creativity produce order-of-magnitude breakthroughs in concept, design, and implementation. Fostering innovation, creative problem solving, and risk-taking is critical to maintaining vitality, enthusiasm, and excellence.

Failure is not an option on the battlefield, but it certainly is in training and other operations and programs. In fact, creativity and innovation can result in radical improvements in individual and unit performance; the quality of organizational systems; and warfighting concepts, all of which have obvious relationships to battlefield excellence.

Too often our response when something is not working as well as we would like for it to is to “try harder”; that is, plan a better wargame, improve a maintenance program, get the indirect-fires system under control, or fix “Sergeant’s Time.” “Try harder” is a sure-fire way to get nowhere when people are doing their best under a prevailing paradigm. Instead of asking them to try harder, how about asking them to think differently? Allow people to think in different ways to improve performance, and then unleash them and see what happens. Use ideas from other units, from other professions, and from other fields of study to stimulate creative thought. Doing so is a great way to use a stretching experience to build confidence, expand thinking, and improve the organization.

Creativity and innovation do, however, need focus and direction. We can drown ourselves in good ideas. Hyperactivity generally creates more problems than it solves. Some things are not broken and do not need fixing; others are not broken but could use improvement. Educating people on the difference is important. Look for areas that need improvement, tell people what you want done and why, and then help guide them. The trust and confidence given to others will be rewarded in their enthusiasm, ownership of standards, and excellence. Soldiers will amaze you with their ingenuity, and when they succeed, even partially, praise them in public.

A leader who promotes creativity and change must have the maturity to accept that not all will turn out well. There is no better way to bring improvement to a halt than to punish someone when honest innovation goes awry. Innovation rarely comes from a unit commanded by a screamer.

When a project fails, praise the individual publicly for having the guts to try something new, look for the golden nuggets in the effort that the unit can use, and take the time to see if the effort can be directed onto another vector. Chances are you will see plenty of ways to use the innovations and ideas embedded in the project.

Celebrate failure. Try something new and have the maturity to write off mistakes along the way. The road to excellence is not smooth; it is bumpy and full of high adventure; it is fun, painful, daunting, exciting, and rewarding.

Be Humble

Humility and courage are complementary qualities and admitting mistakes takes courage. Asking for and accepting feedback, especially from subordinates, and listening patiently and thoughtfully to the insights and ideas of others, particularly when they do not agree with yours, is difficult. Few people have earned respect who have not admitted mistakes, accepted feedback, or listened to others.

Screamers and beraters are among the world's most insecure people. They lack confidence, courage, and humility. They use fear to control their subordinates, and while they might be able to manage their

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subordinates, they will never lead them. The best leaders are humble, and because they are humble, they can bring out the best in others.

Real leaders promote the idea that disagreement does not equal disrespect. The best leaders revel in disagreement because they know that independent thinking is the only way to discover the best solutions to problems. And, independent thinking cannot occur in an environment that demands blind obedience. The magic of exchanging ideas is getting to know what and how other people think. Having faith and confidence in each other's performance in uncertain and ambiguous situations is the key to initiative.

Leaders can promote independent thinking in several ways. They can set up a tactical problem on a map or terrain board and have subordinates work independently on solutions. They can have them read an article and then go out to lunch with them and discuss it. They should challenge their subordinates to take a stand on issues. And, they should not only challenge their subordinates' ideas, they should allow subordinates to challenge theirs.

Leaders should get feedback from subordinates during routine counseling. Often, the most meaningful feedback comes from our subordinates rather than our superiors. But, they will only tell us the full truth if they know we are genuine, if they know disagreement does not equal disrespect, if they see us take action on their feedback, and if they know that what they say is not going to be held against them. Being a leader is not a popularity contest. Feedback is a dialogue among professionals to improve the organization. Leaders should also get feedback in group settings. A selected group should submit in advance what the unit should sustain and what it should improve. The leader should separate the issues into what is not going to change (and why); what cannot be changed (and why); what will change immediately; and what will require long-term effort.

Give feedback on subordinates' feedback. Let them know when you implement one of their ideas, and tell them how the idea has improved the unit. Listening to subordinates and acting on their input strengthens the fabric of mutual trust and respect. A good leader should have the courage and confidence to be humble, listen to others, set the example, and foster healthy disagreement and the exchange of ideas and insights.

Pay It Forward: Be A Mentor

Have you ever tried to pay back a mentor? Have you ever felt helpless in trying to do so? If so, that is because you cannot pay back a mentor, and real mentors would not want you to. What they want you to do is to "pay it forward." They want you to mentor someone else and make a difference in that person's life. That is what mentoring and perpetuating professional excellence is about. The following paragraphs detail some ideas I have picked up from great leaders.

Counsel. Take the time once a month or once a quarter to sit down with subordinates and talk. Do it over lunch or while at PT if you do not like the office setting. Rather than just providing direct feedback, make it a conversation. Reaffirm expectations, areas of focus, and issues from last time. Ask the counseled soldier what he thinks are his strengths and weaknesses, then work together on strategies he can use to sustain and improve his performance. Interject as necessary, ask leading questions, and help the soldier bring up the issues. Write down the strengths, weak-

nesses, and strategies discussed; establish ways to monitor implementation; and use them as a springboard for the next session. This active method of counseling is effective because it gets the counseled person involved in a meaningful way. You should also help with career counseling. Soldiers like to know leaders are working on their behalf, trying to fashion ideas and options that are rewarding and fulfilling for them. At the end of the session, ask the soldier for feedback on how you can improve as a leader, how you can make his job go more smoothly, and how you can help him excel. Write this down, too, and use the next session to monitor your improvement. This technique takes humility but is effective.

Professional development. The unit no doubt has formal professional-development programs, but develop your own informal program. Set a time once a week to go out to lunch and discuss an article or idea of professional relevance. Discuss tactical problems. Use the opportunity to hone the intellect. Exchange ideas, argue, or work together on how to implement solutions. Possessing intellectual depth and courage helps people cope with uncertainty and complexity. Having a professional-development program also shows that you care about leader development and about the people with whom you work.

Mentoring takes time and effort. Because it seems like something that is just nice to do, mentoring often becomes the first thing cut in favor of other meetings, projects, and so forth. If you have only a short-term view of things, such a practice makes sense. But over time, mentoring will help propel the organization to greater heights. Showing someone that you care enough to spend your time demonstrates that he is an important member of the team. Mentoring helps sustain a sense of fulfillment both for the mentored and the mentor. There are few greater joys than to see those you mentor excel.

Show You Care

Caring is important enough to be highlighted by itself. Caring comes in myriad forms, including providing high-quality training, sound equipment, and a good quality of life for soldiers and their families, which are all basic necessities. Mentoring soldiers means getting to know them and their families as people; getting them into schools; and giving them the time and opportunity to go to family events and to take care of their personal needs. This hits closer to home. Demonstrating that you care

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When leaders demonstrate they truly care, bonds of trust and respect grow stronger. Soldiers and their families will have confidence that the leader cares. They will know that if the soldier must go to war, he will be well led and well cared for and not treated as an object to be tossed casually into the cauldron.

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about people as individuals rather than as personnel or “human resources” is absolutely critical.

Most great leaders are good with names. They do not need to read from a three-by-five card to discuss subordinates’ accomplishments at a promotion, award, or farewell. They visit family members in the hospital. They write letters to spouses or parents after subordinates get awards or promotions, explaining why the person is valuable to the unit and the Army. When leaders demonstrate they truly care, bonds of trust and respect grow stronger. Soldiers and their families will have confidence that the leader cares. They will know that if the soldier must go to war, he will be well led and well cared for and not treated as an object to be tossed casually into the cauldron.

Caring takes time and effort, but then, anything worthwhile takes time and effort. Take the time and effort to show others they are valuable members of the team.

Treat People with Respect

Respect begins with the conviction that all members of the human race are created equal despite differences in appearance, aptitudes, and talents. No one group is superior to another. Those who understand this know the absurdity of racism, sexism, and other ideologies and phobias that attempt to reduce certain groups to the status of lower life forms. People who believe in the fundamental equality of all see people for who they are. They see what is inside rather than what is only skin deep. They see great potential in each individual.

Professional respect requires that we recognize and value the unique contribution of every individual in the organization. Certainly some people, given their talents and dedication, contribute more than others less able or less motivated. Leaders must understand the distinction between personal respect and professional respect. People who add more value to the organization deserve and earn more professional respect.

Treating people with respect requires us to tell them when they fail to meet Army standards. Not correcting a mistake or deficiency sends a subtle message that the individual is not worth our time because he is either incapable of meeting standards or not important enough to be bothered with.

Respect goes hand-in-hand with caring. When we show soldiers that we care about them, we demonstrate by our actions that we respect them, and we help them grow personally and professionally. As the German philosopher Goethe once said, “Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat him as he can be and should be, and he will become what he can be and should be.”⁴

People want to be treated with respect as human beings and as contributors to the unit. They want to know that their contributions are meaningful and important. When they know they are contributing to the common good, they have a sense of fulfillment.

Be Trustworthy

The foundation of every healthy relationship is trust. Relationships usually fail because of an actual or perceived breach of trust. Just as he earns professional respect, a leader must earn trust. Good leaders are worthy of trust. They possess good character and professional competence. They create meaningful goals that generate excitement, and they

offer coherent plans to meet those goals. They make sound and timely decisions, set the example, uplift those around them to be better, and they care about others and treat them with respect. They do the right thing.

Mutual trust fosters initiative and inculcates a greater sense of responsibility. People who trust one another share a bond of faith and understanding. Leaders who trust their subordinates can loosen the reins and unleash creative energies. Mutual trust in competence, discipline, character, and sound judgment is a requirement for independent initiative.

Trust, which is the foundation of morale, is the first principle of leadership and the emotion that holds an organization together. Trust is the genesis of faith in oneself, one's comrades, one's leaders, and one's unit. The best leaders use the principle of trust to guide their actions and decisions. Trustworthy leaders create high-performing units that have superb morale.

Leave a Legacy of Excellence

Great leaders leave a legacy of excellence for the unit by creating compellingly effective systems and leaving the systems in place when they, themselves, leave. The test of the systems' excellence comes when a leader's successor arrives. If the successor understands the logic and the effectiveness of the systems the previous leader has put in place and keeps those systems in place, the previous leader will have succeeded. Viable systems sustain predictability and balance, and because the best systems do not depend on a leader's personality, units do not need to reinvent the wheel after every transition. A unit with sound systems in place can sustain excellence over a long period.

More important, great leaders leave a legacy in the hearts, minds, and souls of the people they lead. In this regard, there are three types of leaders. There are the nameless, faceless ones we quickly forget because they had little or no effect on us. There are those we remember because they were untrustworthy, treated others without respect, and cared for no one. We remember them because they were so dysfunctional that their negative example is etched in our minds as a model to avoid at all costs. Finally, there are those exceptional leaders we will always remember because of the lifelong positive effect they have had on us. We remember the great examples they set; we remember what they taught us. At a moment's notice, we can recall their faces, names, and the profound effect they had on our lives. They were trustworthy, earned our respect, and genuinely cared about us. Their legacy is the example of excellence that shaped us. They touched our souls. They never asked for anything in return. They embodied what it means to be a leader.

Many leaders get great results, but obtaining great results is not proof of great leadership. We have plenty of people who can get results; they are a dime a dozen. But, for the great leader, great results are merely a byproduct of bringing out the best in others. Such leaders are personal and national treasures. Cultivate them. *MR*

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NOTES

1. General Bruce C. Clarke, quoted in *The Military Quotation Book*, ed. James Charlton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 134.

2. Rudyard Kipling, *Gunga Din and Other Favorite Poems* (New York: Dover Publications), 1990.

3. See John R. Brandt, "Brandt On Leadership—Creativity's True Costs," on-line at <www.industryweek.com/Columns/asp/columns.asp?ColumnId=855>.

4. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted on-line at <<http://gladstone.uoregon.edu/~mlewis/q-goethe.html>>.