

On Leadership

Gen Omar N. Bradley

Military men are expected above all else to be leaders. What they do may well dignify the past, explain today, and secure—for all of us—tomorrow.

I would like to touch upon a few factors that will underscore the value of good leadership. Leadership is an intangible. No weapon, no impersonal piece of machinery ever designed can take its place.

This is the age of the computer, and if you know how to program the machine you can get quick and accurate answers. But how can you include leadership—and morale, which is affected by leadership—into your programming? Let us never forget the great importance of leadership; and while we use computers to obtain certain kinds of answers, let us not try to fight a whole war or even a single battle without giving proper consideration to the element of leadership.

Another element to be considered is the Man to be led, with whose morale we are concerned. I am constantly reminded of this point by a cartoon which hangs over my desk at home depicting an infantryman with his rifle across his knees as he sits behind a parapet. Above him is the list of the newest weapons science has devised, and the soldier behind the parapet is saying: “But still they haven’t found a substitute for ME.”

In selecting a company in which to invest our savings, we often give primary consideration to the company with good leadership. In similar manner, a military unit is often judged by its leadership. Good leadership is essential to organized action where any group is involved. The one who commands—be he a military officer or captain of industry—

must project power, an energizing power which marshals and integrates the best efforts of his followers by supplying that certain something for which they look to him, whether guidance, support, encouragement, example, or even new ideas and imagination.

The test of a leader lies in the reaction and response of his followers. He should not have to impose authority. Bossiness in itself never made a leader. He must make his influence felt by example and the instilling of confidence in his followers. Remember, a good leader is one who causes or inspires others, staff or subordinate commanders, to do the job. His worth as a leader is measured by the achievements of the led. This is the ultimate test of his effectiveness.

While it takes a good staff officer to initiate an effective plan, it requires a leader to ensure that the plan is properly executed. That is why the work of collecting information, studying it, drawing a plan, and making a decision is only a small part of the total endeavor; seeing that plan through is the major part. During World War I, while inspecting a certain area, Gen John J. Pershing found a project that was not going well, even though the second lieutenant in charge seemed to have a pretty good plan. General Pershing asked the lieutenant how much pay he received. On hearing the lieutenant’s reply of “\$141.67 per month, Sir,” General Pershing said: “Just remember that you get \$1.67 per month for making your plan and issuing the order, and \$140.00 for seeing that it is carried out.”

Similarly, I can recall a former vice president of an industrial company with which I am familiar. He would formulate some good plans but never followed up to see that his plans got the expected results. I knew he had served in World War II; out of curiosity, I looked into the nature of his service and found that his entire period of service was as a staff officer. He had never had the advantage of a command job; thus his training was incomplete. Maybe if he had remained in the service longer, we could have developed his leadership qualities as well—and this man would still be with the company.

Certainly in these days, however, problems are complex and good staff work plays a large part in resolving them. I have known commanders who were not too smart, but who were very knowledgeable about personnel and knew enough to select the very best for their staffs. No leader knows it all (though you sometimes find one who seems to think he does). A leader should encourage the members of his staff to speak up if they think the commander is wrong. He should

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General Bradley was named Veterans Affairs Administrator in 1946, occupying that position until he was recalled to active duty in 1948 as chief of staff, US Army. In 1950, he was promoted to General of the Army while serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

invite constructive criticism. It is a grave error for the leader to surround himself with “Yes” men.

Gen George C. Marshall was a strong exponent of the principle of having his subordinates speak up. When he first became Chief of Staff of the Army, the secretariat of that office consisted of three officers, including myself, who presented orally to General Marshall the staff papers coming from the divisions of the General Staff. We presented the contents of the staff studies in abbreviated form, citing the highlights of the problem involved, the possible courses of action considered, and the action recommended.

At the end of his first week as chief of staff, General Marshall called us into his office and opened the discussion by saying: “I am disappointed in all of you.” When we inquired if we might ask why, he said: “You haven’t disagreed with a single staff recommendation all week.” We told him it so happened that we were in full agreement with every paper that had been presented, and that we would add our frank comments to any proposal we considered dubious. The very next day, we briefed a paper as written and then pointed out some factors which, in our opinion, made the recommended action questionable. General Marshall responded: “Now that is what I want. Unless I hear all the arguments concerning an action, I am not sure whether I have made the right decision or not.”

Thus, if an officer happens to be detailed to a staff, he should try to avoid being a “Yes” man. I would recommend to all commanders that they inform the members of their staffs that anyone who does not disagree once in a while with what is about to be done is of limited value and should probably be shifted to some other place where he might occasionally have an idea.

Of course, I am thinking about the decision-making process. After a decision is made, everyone must be behind it 100 percent. I thought the British were admirable in this respect during World War II. No matter how much discussion there had been on a subject, as soon as a decision was made you never heard any doubts expressed. You would have the impression that no one involved in making the decision had ever entertained a contrary point of view.

I don’t want to overemphasize leadership of senior officers; my interest extends to leaders of all ranks. An essential qualification of a good leader is the ability to recognize, select, and train junior leaders. During World War II in the Pacific, Col Red Reeder was on a trip for General Marshall. One of his assignments was to inquire into junior leadership. In a book entitled *Born at Reveille*, Colonel Reeder records an account of his conversation with Col Bryant Moore on Guadalcanal:

“Colonel Moore,” I said, “tell me something about leadership.” I had hit a sensitive spot. He forged ahead. “Leadership! The greatest problem here *is* the leaders, and you have to find some way to weed out the weak ones. It’s tough to do this when you’re in combat. The platoon leaders who cannot command, who cannot foresee things, and who cannot act on the spur of the moment in an emergency are a distinct detriment.

‘It is hot here, as you can see. Men struggle; they get heat exhaustion. They come out vomiting and throwing away equipment. The leaders must be leaders and they must be alert to establish straggler lines and stop this thing.

The men have been taught to take salt tablets, but the leaders don’t see to this. Result, heat exhaustion.

The good leaders seem to get killed; the poor leaders get the men killed. The big problem is leadership and getting the shoulder straps on the right people.’”

Sixty-millimeter Japanese mortar shells fell about thirty yards away and attacked a number of coconut trees. I lost interest in taking dictation and the colonel stopped talking. When the salvo was over and things were quiet again, Bryant Moore said, “Where was I? You saw that patrol. I tell you this, not one man in 50 can lead a patrol in this jungle. If you can find out who the good patrol leaders are before you hit the combat zone, you have found out something.

‘I have had to get rid of about twenty-five officers because they just weren’t leaders. I had to make the battalion commander weed out the poor junior leaders! This process is continuous.’”

What, then, are the distinguishing qualities of a leader? There are many essential characteristics, but I will mention a few that come to mind as perhaps the most important. First, he must know his job without necessarily being a specialist in every phase of it. A few years ago it was suggested that all engineering subjects be eliminated from the required studies at West Point. I objected. For example, bridge building is a specialty for engineers; yet, I think every senior officer should have some idea of what is involved. When we reached the Rhine in World War II, it was not necessary that I know how to build a bridge, but it was very helpful that I knew what was involved so that I could see that the bridge engineers received sufficient time and proper logistical backup.

Specialization figures in almost every problem faced today by the military leader or the business manager. This person must get deeply enough into his problem to be able to understand it and manage it intelligently, without going so far as to become a specialist himself in every phase of the problem. One doesn’t have to be a tank expert in order to use a tank unit effectively.

Thomas J. Watson of IBM once said that genius in an executive is the ability to deal successfully with matters he does not understand. This leads to another principle of leadership which I have often found neglected, both in the military and in business. While one need not be a specialist in all phases of his job, he should have a proportionate degree of interest in every aspect of it—and those concerned, the subordinates, should be aware of the leader’s interest.

Thus, leaders must get around and show interest in what their subordinates are doing, even if they don’t know much about the techniques of their subordinate’s work. And, when they are making these visits, they should try to pass out praise when due, as well as corrections or criticism.

We all get enough criticism and we learn to take it. Even Sir Winston Churchill, despite his matchless accomplishments, found occasion to say: “I have benefited enormously from criticism and at no point did I suffer from any perceptible lack thereof.” But let us remember that praise also has a

role to play. Napoléon was probably the most successful exponent of this principle through his use of a quarter inch of ribbon to improve morale and get results.

We tend to speak up about our subordinates' performance only when things go wrong. This is such a well-recognized fact that a "complaint department" is an essential part of many business firms. To my knowledge, no comparable department exists anywhere to handle praise for a job well done. Praise, incidentally, need not be extravagant.

Both mental and physical energy are essential to successful leadership. How many really good leaders have there been who were lazy or weak, or who couldn't stand the strain? Sherman was a good example of a leader with outstanding mental and physical energy. During the advance from Chattanooga to Atlanta, he often went for days with only two or three hours of sleep per night and was constantly in the saddle reconnoitering. He often knew the dispositions and terrain so well that he could maneuver the enemy out of position without a serious fight and with minimum losses.

Conversely, a sick commander is of limited value. It is not fair to the troops under him to have a leader who is not functioning at 100 percent. I had to relieve several senior commanders during World War II because of illness. It is often pointed out that Napoléon didn't lose a major battle until Waterloo, where he was a sick man.

A leader should possess human understanding and consideration for others. Men are not robots and should not be treated as such. I do not by any means suggest coddling. But men are intelligent, complicated beings who will respond favorably to human understanding and consideration. By these means their leader will get maximum effort from each of them. He will also get loyalty—and, in this connection, it is well to remember that loyalty goes down as well as up. The sincere leader will go to bat for his subordinates when such action is needed.

A good leader must sometimes be stubborn. Here, I am reminded of the West Point cadet prayer. A leader must be able to "choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong." Armed with the courage of his convictions, he must often fight to defend them. When he has come to a decision after thorough analysis—and when he is sure he is right—he must stick to it even to the point of stubbornness. Grant furnishes a good illustration of this trait. He never knew when he was supposed to be licked. A less stubborn man might have lost at Shiloh.

During the Richmond campaign, after being up all night making his reconnaissance and formulating and issuing orders, Grant lay down under a tree and fell asleep. Some time later, a courier rode up and informed the general that disaster had hit his right flank and that his troops at that end of line were in full retreat. General Grant sat up, shook his head to clear the cobwebs, and said: "It can't be so," went back to sleep—and it wasn't so.

Of course, in commending stout adherence to one's chosen course of action I do not mean to imply that there is just one solution to a problem. Usually there is one solution, but

any good plan, boldly executed, is better than indecision. There is usually more than one way to obtain results.

Actually, what I have referred to as Grant's stubbornness might better be called confidence. Leaders must have confidence in themselves, their units, their subordinate commanders and in their plans. Just before the invasion of Normandy in 1944, a story went around in some of the amphibious assault units that they would suffer 100 percent casualties—that none of them would come back. I found it necessary to visit these units and talk to all ranks. I told them that we would, naturally, suffer casualties, but that our losses would for certain be manageable and that with air and naval support we would succeed. After our landing, a correspondent told me that on his way across the channel in one of the leading LSTs he had noticed a sergeant reading a novel. Struck by the seeming lack of concern of the sergeant, he asked: "Aren't you worried? How could you be reading at a time like this?" The sergeant replied: "No, I am not worried. General Bradley said everything would go all right, so why should I worry?"

I might relate another incident involving confidence. I had to relieve a senior commander because I learned that his men had lost confidence in him. This meant, of course, that we could not expect maximum performance by that division. After being relieved, the officer came back through my quarters and showed me a file of statements given him at his request, I am sure, by the burgermeisters of all towns his division had passed through. After seeing the letters, I told the officer that if I had ever had any doubts as whether to relieve him, those doubts were now removed. His letters proved beyond question that he had lost confidence in himself, so it was no wonder the men had lost confidence in him.

A leader must also possess imagination. Whether with regard to an administrative decision or one made in combat, the leader must be able to look ahead: what will be the next step—and the one after that? Imagination is the quality that enables him to anticipate the train of consequences that follow from his contemplated courses of action. He must minimize error and be prepared for likely contingencies.

While there are other qualities which contribute to effective leadership, I will mention just one more—but it is a vital one—Character. This word has many meanings. I am applying it in a broad sense to describe a person who has high ideals, who stands by them, and who can be trusted absolutely. Such a person will be respected by all those with whom he is associated. And such a person will readily be recognized by his associates for what he is.

It has been said that a man's character is the reality of himself. Once having been maturely formed, I don't think a man's character ever changes. I remember a long time ago when someone told me that if a mountain was reported to have moved, I could believe or disbelieve it as I wished, but if anyone told me that a man had changed his character, I should not believe it.

All leaders must possess those positive qualities which I have been discussing, and the great leaders are those who pos-

sess one or more of them to an outstanding degree. Some leaders just miss being great because they are weak in one or more of these areas. There is still another ingredient in this formula for a great leader that I have left out, and that is LUCK. He must have the right opportunity. Then, of course, when opportunity knocks, he must be able to rise and open the door.

Some may ask: "Why do you talk about the desirable traits of leadership?" They maintain that you either have leadership or you don't—that leaders are born, not made. I suppose some are born with a certain amount of leadership. Frequently, we see children who seem inclined to take charge and direct their playmates. The other youngsters follow these directions without protest. But I am convinced nevertheless leadership can be developed and improved by study and training.

There is no better way to develop a person's leadership than to give him a job involving responsibility and let him work it out. We should try to avoid telling him how to do it.

That principle, for example, is the basis of our whole system of combat orders. We tell the subordinate unit commander that we want him to do and leave the details to him. I think this system is largely responsible for the many fine leaders in our services today. We are constantly training and developing younger officers and teaching them to accept responsibility.

However, don't discount experience. Someone may remind you that Napoléon led armies before he was 30, and that Alexander the Great died at the age of 33. Napoléon, as he grew older, commanded even larger armies. Alexander might have been even greater had he lived longer and gained more experience. In this respect, I especially like Gen Bolivar Buckner's theory that "Judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgment." Thus, all other factors being equal, the leader with experience will have a considerable advantage over the leader who lacks it.