

Guidelines for Leadership

Gen Robert T. Herres

Students of leadership and management techniques certainly do not suffer from a lack of source materials. Libraries are filled with volumes on the “how to” of these subjects. Many of the world’s most successful men and women have written at great length about their experiences, philosophies, and methods of getting to the top of their professions. Others, as students rather than practitioners, have taken a more analytical approach by studying organizational behavior. We are literally inundated with rules, systems, and checklists—you can “search for excellence” or be a “one-minute manager”; terms such as *right-brain thinking*, *zero-based budgeting*, and *management by exception* grow abundantly in the almost magical garden of leadership literature.

The biographical approach to leadership is useful to a degree; however, I’ve found that circumstances and personalities are rarely aligned closely enough to make a useless exercise of even wondering what Hannibal, Washington, or whomever would have done. On the other hand, while the cookbook approaches are appealing to the eye, the real world seems bent on providing a cup of sugar too little or a cup of salt too much at any particular decision point. Total reliance on either approach tends to give a false sense of comfort and is likely to fail miserably when the ingredients or circumstances don’t match up. There is no panacea for the problem.

Leadership is not something you can learn and then go execute; rather it is something to be lived and wrestled with everyday. It’s sort of like flying. You can learn to fly, earn your wings, but what you’ve really accomplished is merely to demonstrate proficiency in the principles of flight. From then on, every time you take off, you must re-earn those wings as you adapt your knowledge and skills to the situations that the machine, the elements, and the enemy present. So too, leadership is a constant learning experience that is wholly individualized and very much a problem of adapting one’s attributes (and accounting for one’s weaknesses) to the situations encountered.

Leadership is clearly an art rather than a science; indeed, an elusive art form. Because it is so elusive, I think it is best discussed in conceptual terms. In so doing, the essence comes out, “causing others to participate productively and positively contribute to the achievement of a set of goals too big for

individual accomplishment, or too tough for spontaneous or accidental accomplishment.” In other words, getting others to do things collectively that they could not or would not be able to do on their own. Just as there are many definitions, there are also many theories and ideas about how to pursue and perfect this elusive art form. And because it is an art rather than a science, there are really no set rules that will work for everyone, every time. When called upon to list what he thought to be the essential character traits of the general officers of the Continental Army, George Washington named the following: character, professional ability, integrity, prudence, and loyalty. I think our first commander in chief had the right idea. Rather than provide rules, he provided broad concepts that had to be lived rather than memorized for later recitation. Concepts which are necessarily strengthened by constant use because the higher you go on any organizational ladder, the more issues and the murkier the ethical waters. The true leader must have the vision to see beyond the here and now and the strength of character to stay the course. Over the years I have tried to abide by a few conceptual guidelines with one overarching principle that enriches each, and that holds them all together. That principle is integrity; without it, the six guidelines discussed in the following paragraphs, or any others, would be cosmetic.

The nature of the military profession is so entwined with the very existence of our nation that military leaders must maintain a high standard of conduct; higher, I believe, than in any other profession. Integrity is the most important characteristic that any leader can ever have and this is even more critical in a military leader. It has more to do with whether you are going to be effective as a leader than any other factor. People instinctively respect others with integrity. Our protection of this standard is the key to the respect and confidence of the public at large; after all, our military is designed not only to be of service to the nation, but must be fully responsive to its people. I believe that Sir John Hackett summed it up best in his book, *The Military in the Service of the State*:

A man can be selfish, cowardly, disloyal, false, fleeting, perjured, and normally corrupt in a wide variety of other ways, and still be outstandingly good in pursuits in which other imperatives bear than those upon the fighting man. He can be a superb artist for example, or a scientist in the very top flight and still be a bad man. What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or soldier, or airman.¹

Understanding the absolute criticality of the overarching principle of integrity, we can move on to the six guidelines: communicate, fix responsibility, be loyal both ways, be con-

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sistent, learn from mistakes, and be yourself. Let me discuss each one in some detail.

First, communicate. You must learn how to get concepts and ideas across—accurately—to others; both subordinates and supervisors. Workers deal with hardware, tools, and equipment; leaders deal with people, concepts, and ideas. Communicating those concepts and ideas to your people is much harder than most of us realize. Telling people what they need to know is one thing; getting across the idea they need to understand is likely to be a much higher order of achievement. The business of leadership is the transmission of ideas, and that is difficult. Most of our professional military education includes a number of written assignments for this reason. Leaders must be able to reduce good ideas to the precision of the written word. I hasten to add, however, that many effective leaders are not particularly articulate, yet still are able to get their ideas across by example or similarly subtle techniques. Nevertheless, unambiguous, clear instructions are critical to the successful execution of any project—both up and down the chain of command.

I believe that the best way to improve this ability is to read a lot. Don't get seduced by the tube. Get a lot of your news and opinions from reading and don't be afraid to read viewpoints that may be out of the mainstream or that may go against the grain. It is a common mistake to read only the journals that tell us what we want to believe. Read the magazines that publish things that are critical, even unfairly critical of ideas that you may hold dear. Try to understand their editorial viewpoints and formulate your rebuttal point for point. Read the works of great leaders of the past to see how they expressed their ideas. Great leaders have always been great communicators—George S. Patton; Douglas MacArthur; Winston Churchill; and Abraham Lincoln, the great communicator of all time.

The second guideline is to fix responsibility not only among your subordinates but also for yourself. Understand exactly what your responsibility is, and be sure you and your boss have a common understanding. If you seek authority but dodge responsibility (and many do) you are a nonleader; worse than that, you are an imposter. There must be no confusion about what the task is and what results are expected. From this it should be clear that fixing responsibility is dependent on the previous principle, communication.

Avoid assigning the same tasks to more than one person without putting someone in charge. There must be no confusion about who will have to answer if the result is failure; likewise, this ensures that the deserving are rewarded for success. Committees are not, and cannot be responsible because individual accountability is shared. Fixing responsibility means ensuring that the "what" and the "who" are clearly communicated. People like to get credit when they do a good job, and they know if one of their fellow workers is not doing a good job. You can't put credit with the right person unless it's clear who's responsible for what. Similarly, you want your boss to know that you know what he or she expects of you. Communications and fixing responsibility

are direct contributors to the concept of two-way loyalty, which is my third guideline.

Loyalty, that is fundamental as a leadership characteristic, goes in two directions. You must be loyal to your people and to your boss. If you have built your relationships with both based on integrity, there will be no conflicts between your loyalties. You will take on many roles in the eyes of your subordinates; the one that you cannot abdicate is that of leader. In taking care of your subordinates, you must ensure that you don't confuse yourself or your people by replacing loyalty with doting paternalism. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel is often quoted as having said that the best form of welfare for the troops is tough training. Be loyal to your people by ensuring that they understand what you want and by rewarding them for success. Your integrity will let you know when you should shield them from the fallout of your mistakes.

Remember, you've got to be loyal to your boss as well. Your boss's job and mission are your responsibility. You should know what his or her job description is and you should know what piece of that job description is yours. Everybody who works for the same boss has a piece of his or her job description. Civil War Gen George B. McClellan was certainly adept at organizing, equipping, and training his men. The dramatic turn-around of the Union forces' state of morale and readiness after First Bull Run (Manassas) gives ample evidence of these talents. However, it was never clear that he was devoted to solving his commander in chief's problems, and eventually President Lincoln removed him from command because of this. An old boss who was a real leader, Gen William McBride, once said, "You should always work your boss's problems, not your own. That's part of selflessness. Don't expect him to work your problems. You work his. You think about him. Think about his responsibilities. Think about what he is trying to do. Not only what he told you to do, but think hard about what he really wants to do. Work his problems . . . if you will be selfless, you will fit that category of bright leadership of tomorrow." You can't have loyalty until you understand what is expected of you and what you expect of other people.

The fourth guideline is be consistent. The kindest thing you can do for your people is to be consistent. They want to know what to expect from you and what you expect from them. The first three guidelines are natural building blocks to achieving this understanding. Among these expectations or standards may be the use of technical data or operational procedures, compliance with regulations, standards for personal appearance, or treatment of poor performance. Be sure that variations are well understood. Troops who don't know what to expect of their "leader" and have difficulty knowing how he or she will react, are not likely to be happy with their situation. We live in a dynamic world. Policies and ground rules that people become accustomed to are like a moving train. Making sense that seems consistent out of it all as a high-level leadership changes, with the whims and fancies of the policymakers ricocheting all through the system, is always difficult. We live in a very dynamic environment; the

good leader must weave a strong thread of consistency through the fabric of it all.

The fifth guideline is to learn from mistakes. This guideline is very important. It's what experience is all about. Abraham Lincoln said he had no respect for the man who was not smarter today than he was yesterday. The only way to be smarter today is to study yesterday; treat every unsuccessful event as if you must unlock it. Not to fix blame, but to fix the problem and learn ways to prevent others like it before they happen. Don't go through an operation, incident, or any event without learning something. Learn from other people's mistakes, learn from your own; analyze your mistakes and don't be afraid to look at yourself in the mirror and think about them. Don't ever pass up an opportunity to learn from a mistake, even one you didn't make. I've been to a lot of staff meetings under some hard masters, and I've heard a lot of people get wire-brushed hard. I've seen too many people in those circumstances tune it all out, simply grateful not to be in the "hot seat." I never turned those tune-out valves. I said to myself, that could be me if I don't pay attention to what I'm doing. What is it that person did wrong and how do I prevent that from happening to me or to my organization?

I think that kind of thing has helped me more in my career than anything else. I've been fascinated by the business of government, the business of democracy and how it works, and I've always tried to soak up as much as I could in every learning environment in every learning environment in which I was situated. Don't stop learning when you leave formal schools; the best school is usually the "School of Hard Knocks." And it's not only your hard knocks, it can be

somebody else's hard knocks. Learn from mistakes. Some people repeat one year of experience 20 times. Others are enriched by 20 years of experience. Never let mistakes go to waste; they cost too much.

My sixth and last guideline is be yourself. Here is where the principle of integrity is most pervasive. If integrity is truly deeply ingrained in your character, then this guideline will probably take care of itself. Learn from others—from the great lessons and leaders of history—learn to apply the principles that made great leaders what they were, but don't imitate their style. There are characteristics of others that you can adapt to your own style and there are things you can learn from the way others operate and behave, but never imitate anyone. Make whatever it is you do to be a good leader fit you. You have to do what's comfortable for you. So be yourself. In a letter to his son on the day the Allies landed at Normandy Beach, George S. Patton wrote, "People who are not themselves are nobody." If you're trying to be somebody else, you're kind of losing something of your own fundamental self and with that, your integrity.

So, there they are—my six guidelines: communicate with others; fix responsibility; be loyal both ways; be consistent; learn from mistakes; and be yourself. Above all, remember that integrity is the essential ingredient that binds them all together.

Notes

1. Gen Sir John Hackett, "The Military in the Service of the State," Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, no. 13 (Colorado Springs, Colo.: US Air Force Academy, 1971).