

# Practical Leadership

Gen Thomas C. Richards

It's difficult to talk about leadership in a short period of time and even more difficult to discuss briefly the differences between leadership and management. Volumes have been written on both subjects, so I will not attempt to draw a distinction between the two in the short time I have.

The Air Force is a diverse organization composed of flyers and nonflyers, military and civilians, each with major leadership and management responsibilities. Should leading a squadron in combat and managing a weapons acquisition program be compared? Most would agree the answer is *no*—there are too many differences. However, many people would agree that it takes some ability with both if one is to be successful. Rather than take on both subjects, I will narrow my scope to explore leadership in the military context, drawing from my experiences in two wars and over 30 years in the military.

I believe some people are born leaders with inherent ability to command; others can be taught to varying degrees. We can remember when we were children the informal leader who emerged to take charge of the playground. On a school football team, the quarterback was designated to call the plays, but when the going was tough, the informal leaders, the guys who sparked the team all year, through the heat of the late summer practice, on the cold and wet autumn afternoons, were the ones who gave the team the courage and determination needed to make the big play—to win the game. Some people are lucky enough to be born with that kind of leadership ability. Others, through training and experience, rise to the challenge when the pressure is on.

Leadership is a vital part of today's Air Force; therefore, we cannot depend on born leaders—we must build them through formal training and progressive levels of responsibility. This training begins early in both the enlisted and officer forces. For enlisted personnel, training starts in the leadership schools that prepare our young airmen for noncommissioned officer (NCO) rank. As they progress, NCO attend our various major-command NCO academies, finally culminating at the Senior NCO Academy at Gunter Air Force Base, Alabama. This process entails a significant

financial investment—an investment so important that the leadership of the Air Force has never failed to support it.

We make the same kinds of investment in training leaders in our officer corps. For officers, the process begins when they are US Air Force Academy, ROTC, or Officer Training School cadets. At the academy, a large part of the curriculum is directed at nurturing and cultivating leadership qualities over a four-year period. Officer skills are then refined and honed through organizational assignments, formal follow-on training and education at our Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, Air War College, and a host of other schools.

The Air Force has another important procedure to identify and train leaders; you might call it the filter process. As officers move up through the ranks and gain experience, they are part of an overall system that identifies only the best for promotion, based on demonstrated skills and potential to lead at the next higher level. As leaders, we should continually evaluate our people, looking for individuals with special leadership skills, and then we should ensure that person is placed in positions of increased responsibility. Both our formal and informal programs to identify and nurture leaders are important to the future of the Air Force.

There are many qualities good leaders must possess. But there is an overarching principle, an attribute if you will, that all good leaders must possess: integrity. Without integrity, you cannot be a good officer or an effective NCO. Your leadership will be flawed to the point of impotence at best, destructiveness at worst. Therefore, integrity, a collection of moral and ethical standards, must guide your every decision. If you do not have integrity you are a facade, a “tinkling bell and a clanging cymbal” as the Apostle Paul put it; or, as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* so aptly states, you will become “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Integrity is an absolute essential for leadership.

During one of his speeches at Air University, Gen Robert T. Herres identified five guides for leadership. Let me borrow from those guidelines as I provide some additional commentary to accompany them from my own study and experiences.

Effective leadership requires the ability to communicate. An effective leader must define concepts, making the subordinates understand why the mission is important and how their actions fit into that mission. If your people do not understand their mission, your command will soon be like a ship without a rudder, floundering helplessly in troubled

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seas. Like a ship's captain, you have to communicate two ways: down to the crew and up to the admiral.

There is more to communicating than just giving orders. The commander who thinks it is sufficient merely to issue orders and then wait for the job to get done will fail as a leader. But that does not mean that good leaders constantly look over their people's shoulders. It does mean that leaders must develop a system for assessing the effectiveness of communication within the organization. Some call it "feedback." Every leader must create two-way communications: understanding and acceptance.

Even today with all the experience I've gained, I am constantly amazed at how my words, my intentions, and my orders are misinterpreted. I make it a point to talk to people at the bottom of the chain, trying to determine if they understand what my policies are on given issues. When you don't have good feedback, your intentions and orders get misinterpreted and changed as they flow down through the chain of command and out through the various organizations. When a leader makes a policy statement to the staff or issues an order verbally, it may be interpreted by each individual in a different way. It is then passed along, with another person's interpretation added to what you said. Before long, through lack of understanding, diffusion, and additional interpretations, an absolutely bizarre policy may emerge. This is something one has to guard against at all times. The larger the organization or command, the more potential there is for this to happen. Communicative skills play a most important role in leadership. Good leaders who realize that will keep in touch with their organizations to make sure that what they say is completely understood.

The second principle is to fix responsibility. The ability to fix responsibility is almost as essential as integrity in making an effective leader. Why do you have to fix responsibility? Your people have to know what you expect of them. There can be no question in their minds about what the commander expects. Again, this is a two-way street. As commander, you have to be absolutely certain your word is understood among your subordinates, and you must understand what your commander expects of you. Your responsibility is to understand the mission of your organization as your boss sees it and to fix responsibility throughout your command so that your people will understand exactly what is expected of them. When they fail to perform to the level you have defined, you, as the commander and the leader, can discuss their shortcomings in terms they can understand. The leader is the one to set the example. If one seeks authority but dodges responsibility, one is not a leader. Worse, a leader becomes an imposter, someone sitting in a seat of authority where he or she does not belong. The world is full of people who want authority but who are not willing to accept the responsibility that goes with it. Wearing the rank alone does not make you a leader.

When a leader fixes responsibility, it is important that tasks are properly and appropriately assigned. Do not give the same task to different people. The larger the organization, the more specific one has to be. It is not a good idea to

toss something out and say, "Okay troops, let's go do it." If it is a fun thing that has to be done, all your people step all over each other doing it. If it's difficult, they will stand back, waiting for someone else to take the initiative. Be specific by making the right people responsible.

As leader, you are responsible for who is doing what and how he or she is doing it. You have to know so you can reward those who do a good job. If you reward the wrong people for doing a good job, you offend those who have actually performed the assignment, and, furthermore, you have lost a measure of credibility. If you have failed to define responsibility within your organization, you run the risk of not knowing who is doing what. Just remember, most people want to do things correctly. If they are properly led and given credit when credit is due, they will work well. The organization will prosper, and you will accomplish your mission.

The next guideline is to be consistent. The kindest thing you can do for your people is to be consistent in your dealings with them. We live in a world of change. In the military, new regulations are written and issued each year. There are policy changes that attempt to keep pace with the turbulent world in which we live. A good leader brings consistency to an organization. People appreciate consistency because they like to know what is going to happen and how the commander is going to react to certain situations. It is very difficult to work for someone who is consistently inconsistent. Too much unpredictability keeps people nervous. You can't praise and promote people on one day and then destroy them on the next. Being tough does not keep one from being a good leader. Some great football coaches have been very tough and demanding, but they were great because they were consistent, predictable, and their teams knew what the coach expected. Insisting on or demanding that high standards be met is not being too tough on your organization—it's how you do it that's important.

The next guideline is to learn from mistakes. Learning from our mistakes is the essence of experience. You can also learn from the mistakes of others, your friends, your commander, and your subordinates. We all make mistakes, and there are lessons in each of them. When you make a mistake, recognize it as such. Admit it to others and, most important, admit it to yourself. Then ask the difficult questions about how the mistake happened. Did I have enough information? Did I ask enough questions? Abraham Lincoln said, "I have no respect for the man who is not smarter today than he was yesterday." Perhaps the most difficult thing we have to do with ourselves is to dig deep into our own shortcomings and ask ourselves why we fail or make mistakes. This is especially true for people who continue to make the same mistake over and over.

After you have discovered the mistake, you will want to rectify the situation. Make sure that when you do so, you are correcting the appropriate problem. Too many of us cure symptoms rather than correct the cause. All too often, I read replies to IG reports that indicate organizations are working at correcting only symptoms rather than solving the problems

involved. Those organizations are not going to flourish. Their commanders have failed to work the right thing, and they are destined to have the same problem surface again later.

The last guideline I offer is, be yourself. We should emulate the characteristics we admire in great leaders but must realize we cannot be those leaders. I am not a Patton or an Eisenhower, a Grant or a Lee. Neither are you. We can learn from these great leaders by reading history and studying their biographies, but we cannot become them. You can borrow tips from them by studying what they did and how they did it and trying to mold their good qualities into your own style, but you must be yourself. If you try to be anything other than yourself, you will be tagged as a phony or a buffoon. Be yourself—an honest person of integrity—and be straight with your people.

These guidelines can help you become an effective leader. If you are an effective leader, you will find great satisfaction in doing most of the things leaders do: patting people on the back, watching them grow into effective leaders, sharing in the pride of an organization that is accomplishing its mission, and quite possibly reaping the personal reward of increased responsibility through recognition from above. That's what is rewarding in leadership. Like most things in life, "it's not all fun." There is an important part of leadership responsibility that is distinctly unpleasant but absolutely essential: holding people accountable for their mistakes and taking appropriate action. It's tough, and it is unpleasant. But

if a military commander cannot do these unpleasant things, then he or she is no leader.

As a leader, you have to take responsibility for the harsh realities of command. When a subordinate does something that requires punishment, you must do what is required. You have to meet your responsibility as a commander for two reasons. First, you, as the commander, set the example for the rest of the organization. Your integrity demands that you keep your organization honest. If you do not lie, cheat, or steal, then your organization must know that lying, cheating, or stealing will not be tolerated in your organization. Second, there is a deterrent effect in punishment. If you punish the troublemakers, others will think twice before crossing over that line between what is acceptable and legal and what is not. If you cannot handle this tough part of leadership, the organization will sense it, and you will lose credibility. Furthermore, the troublemakers will multiply, and your organization, including the 95 percent who are decent folks, will suffer.

In summary, leading successfully is the most rewarding challenge one can experience. There is no better way to do it than to lead by example. The virtues of a good leader will be an example for others to emulate. Someday, a 100 years from now, maybe some future general will be admonishing junior officers to study Patton, MacArthur, and *you* as examples of good leadership. I sincerely hope so.