

Serve Your Soldiers to Win

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Effective leadership on the battlefield depends on many factors. One of the most important factors may be a philosophy of leadership based on selfless service to your soldiers. This article is the 1986 winner of the Douglas MacArthur Military Leadership Writing Competition sponsored each year for resident students of the Command and General Staff Officers Course by the Center for Army Leadership, US Army Command and General Staff College.

On June 12, 1944, a week after the D-day invasion, Gen George C. Marshall . . . made an inspection trip to Europe. With Gen Dwight D. Eisenhower as . . . escort (he) went over and up and down the beachheads in jeeps. They stopped at noon at a field lunch mess, and as they sat on ammunition boxes, General Marshall turned suddenly to General Eisenhower and said, "Eisenhower, you've chosen all these commanders or accepted the ones I suggested. What's the principal quality you look for?" Eisenhower (later related), "Without thinking, I said, 'Selflessness'."¹

By its very nature, leadership is complex. There are many precepts and values on which to base a leadership philosophy. However, selfless service, with its three components (service to your soldiers, to your unit and to the nation), is one of the most critical elements of battlefield leadership. These components are mutually reinforcing. Selfless service to your soldiers (*all* subordinates) is born of service to your unit and the nation.

A leadership philosophy based on selfless service to soldiers, the primary object of which is battlefield victory, can provide the necessary basis for all leadership actions in battle. US history has shown that the leader who meets the *needs* of his soldiers produces a winning unit. The leader who considers his personal desires first is on a sure path to defeat.

The Value

The US Army chief of staff's *White Paper, 1986, Values: The Bedrock of Our Profession* includes selfless service as one of the four values of the professional Army ethic. The other three are loyalty, duty, and integrity. The White Paper says in part that:

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. . . what is best for the Nation comes before personal interest. The Army cannot function to the best of its abilities if its members become a collection of self-serving individuals. . . . Military service demands the willingness to sacrifice—even to the extent of expecting soldiers to give their lives and even the lives of their fellow soldiers in defense of the Nation.²

The nation, the unit and the soldier are each important to selfless service. However, the nation is best served by having units prepared to win in battle, and winning units are made by soldiers whose leaders have served them well. Successful battlefield leaders serve their soldiers by meeting their needs for security, caring leadership, teamwork, ready equipment, discipline, tough training and *more* tough training. The selfless leader serves his soldiers so he may better serve his unit and the nation:

As a leader you must be the greatest "servant" in your unit. You are not given authority, status, and position as a personal reward to enjoy in comfort. You are given them so that you may be of greater service to your subordinates, your unit, and your country.³

To serve, you must give up your "self" and place the concerns of others first. Does this mean the leader must completely disregard his own well-being? No. He must meet his own *needs* but resist the natural tendency to focus on self-serving desires.

Selfless service is not just an attitude—it is a lifestyle. One of our nation's best examples is the first commander in chief, Gen George Washington. Washington dedicated his life to the service of his men and the nation. His speech in March 1783 to a meeting of Army officers exemplifies this. His officers were ready to rebel at Congress's lack of support. At the end of his prepared speech, he recognized that he had little effect on his audience. He then decided he would read a letter from a congressman, but he fumbled helplessly for a moment:

Washington pulled from his pocket something that only his intimates had seen him wear: a pair of eyeglasses. "Gentlemen," he said, "you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country."⁴

This act and simple statement quelled the rebellion. This reminder of Washington's sacrifice for his men and his nation was enough to make his officers realize that their first

duty was to serve. Look closely at the selfless leader, and his selfless service will be as evident off the job as on the job.

One might ask whether selfless service precludes personal ambition. It does not. Without ambition, we would have few leaders. But the leader who is successful in battle has an ambition to excel, an ambition to succeed and not to fail. His ambition is to be the best, not to receive fame and honor but because to be the best is his duty—his duty to his soldiers, his unit and the nation. It is selfish ambition which leads to failure. A leader who fights for fame and glory cannot lead because he cannot see the needs of his soldiers. The successful leader knows that for him to excel, his soldiers must excel.

Selfless service is the lifeblood of leadership. Soldiers want a leader to do what is best for them and to lead them. This does not mean good leaders pamper their soldiers and do whatever they want. What is best for soldiers is to meet their needs, not cater to their whims. What is best for soldiers is to build their confidence, not oversolicit them. What is best for soldiers is to build teams, not self-serving individuals. Finally, what is best for soldiers on the battlefield is for them to fight as a team and win. If they know this is the purpose of their work and their leader serves them and not himself, they will willingly sacrifice *their* self-centered desires to win.

Only the selfless leader can develop a unit prepared to win in battle:

[Initiative] requires a willingness and ability to act independently within the framework of the higher commander's intent . . . initiative requires audacity which may involve risk-taking and an atmosphere that supports it. . . . In the chaos of battle, it is essential to decentralize decision authority to the lowest practical level because overcentralization slows action and leads to inertia . . . decentralization demands subordinates who are willing and able to take risks and superiors who nurture that willingness and ability in their subordinates.⁵

The selfless leader is able to subordinate his self-interest and focus on serving the needs of his soldiers. He can take the risk inherent in delegating authority and train his subordinate leaders to act independently within his intent. He can trust them and develop within them a sense of initiative and boldness. He can allow them (and will even force them) to make important, critical decisions, thereby developing their judgment. He can support their honest mistakes for the sake of learning and take responsibility for the performance of his unit.

Moreover, he will set, and be tough in maintaining, high standards of performance and conduct. He sets the example for caring leadership, and he ensures his subordinate leaders to do likewise. He can do all of this because his focus is not on himself but on service to his soldiers. He knows that battlefield success depends on his subordinate leaders' ability to fight successfully without his close supervision. He knows that to develop these attributes in them, he must be more concerned with them than he is with himself. He achieves battlefield success by making his subordinates successful.

On the other hand, the leader who places his own success first will likely meet ultimate defeat. It is difficult for the self-serving leader to delegate authority and to trust his subordinates. He cannot allow them the chance to act independently. To protect himself, he must do everything himself. His subordinates will not develop initiative, aggressiveness or judgment. They will be cautious and be trained to always look to him for their next move. They will not work as a team. The unit may be able to function like this in peacetime and may even secure short-term battlefield successes, but it is destined to fail in tough, continuous fighting.

If subordinate units are ever isolated, their leaders will hesitate. Mistrust will spread. They will be defeated by their inability to act. The selfish leader cannot see the needs of his soldiers because he is too concerned with his own desires. He cannot serve anyone subordinate to him because that is opposite to his way of thinking. Eisenhower once remarked, "When Napoléon (Bonaparte) started to fight for Napoléon, and not France, France fell."⁶ Battlefield failure awaits the selfish leader.

The Effect

Selfless service to soldiers reaps its greatest reward in cohesion, teamwork and commitment. Effective unit cohesion and teamwork depend on soldiers who subordinate their self-interests for the good of the unit. To have successful teamwork in battle, leaders must develop soldiers who are willing to sacrifice. To do this, the commander must set the example of selfless service. His example can greatly influence the way his unit functions. Eisenhower wrote during World War II:

I have developed almost an obsession as to the certainty with which you can judge a division or any other large unit, merely by knowing its commander intimately. Of course, we have had pounded into us all through our school courses that the exact level of a commander's personality and ability is always reflected in his unit—but I did not realize, until opportunity came for comparisons on a rather large scale, how infallibly the commander and unit are almost one and the same thing.⁷

Subordinates will follow the commander's example and, if the commander wants his soldiers to accept risk and sacrifice for the good of the unit, he must do the same. By serving his soldiers, he will develop cohesion and teamwork. The commander who serves his soldiers also develops soldierly commitment within his unit. Sun Tzu wrote 2,500 years ago:

Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys; look on them as your own beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.⁸

Listen to your soldiers, give them a sense of value and worth. Train them as a team, teach them, be honest with them, discipline them, serve them, and they will follow you. You will have a cohesive and committed unit.

The Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by Gen Robert E. Lee, was just such a unit. His simplicity, devotion

and humility were well-known, and he had an immense effect on the morale of the army:

His methods were as simple as they were effective. They reflected his own character and his interest in the welfare of the men entrusted to him, and in no sense did they bespeak any ordered, calculating analysis of what would or would not inspire soldiers. He rode frequently among the camps. . . . Lee's respect for the individuality of his men extended to their wants and their duties. He was quick to defend them against discrimination and against imposition. The spiritual needs of his men he supplied, also, as best he could. . . . His regard for his men produced in them something akin to the idolatry of youth for greatness.⁹

Lee's soldiers would fight and die for him. On 5 May 1864 in the wilderness near Chancellorsville, the Federal attack began before reinforcements from Gen James Longstreet's corps could arrive. The outnumbered Army of Northern Virginia began to fall back. As Lee hurried to help rally the retreating soldiers, Gen John B. Hood's Texans of Longstreet's corps arrived, and Lee started to lead them in the countercharge. Then, the soldiers "realized what he intended to do. 'Go back, General Lee, go back!' they cried. He paid no heed to them. 'We won't go on unless you go back!'"¹⁰ Lee yielded and went back to find Longstreet. His soldiers went forward in his place and carried the battle for the Confederates.

Two words of caution, however, to the leader who selflessly serves his soldiers. First, he must also serve *his* leader. He may receive an order contrary to what he believes is best for his soldiers. If he is true to himself and his soldiers, he will voice his disagreement. But, once his leader makes the final decision, he will obey. Second, a deep and true concern for his soldiers may cause the leader to be too cautious in battle. His concern for the immediate safety of his men may preclude him from taking calculated risks in the face of danger.

Gen George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac during most of 1862, dearly loved his men, and his men loved him. But his concern for the safety of his men contributed to his cautious, methodical approach to battle. In the Seven Days' Campaign, he retreated from Richmond in the face of a smaller force. At Antietam, he failed to pursue his gains against Lee's army even though he had fresh reinforcements about equal in number to his exhausted enemy. McClellan "loved his men so much that he could not bear to sacrifice them in battle."¹¹

Serve your soldiers—but do it to prepare them for victory in battle, not to protect them from harm. Sun Tzu cautioned against a similar pitfall—oversolicitude:

The last of such faults (of generalship) is oversolicitude for his men, which exposes him to worry and trouble, for in the long run the troops will suffer more from the defeat, or at best, the prolongation of the war, which will be the consequence.¹²

The idea of service does not mean meekness in the face of adversity. On the contrary, it means just the opposite. Inherent in a dedication to serving others is a willingness to make the tough decisions required for the benefit of those

you serve. Sacrifice, hard work, and strict discipline are concepts of caring to the commander who serves his soldiers.

The Application

The importance of this value to battlefield leadership increases at higher levels of command because of the greater authority and influence of the commander. However, it is more difficult for the higher level commander to exert *personal* influence over all of his soldiers because of the constraints of time, the size of his command, and greater battlefield dispersion. Not only must he show caring and selfless leadership through personal example, but he must also do this by shaping the command's policies, training, fighting doctrine and operations around the needs of his soldiers. The commander can apply this philosophy of leadership by knowing his soldiers' needs, knowing what affects their morale and by ensuring his subordinate commanders know likewise.

The commander can use this important moral force in battle to his best advantage. Col Ardant du Picq attached great significance to this moral force:

The art of war is subject to many modifications by industrial and scientific progress. But one thing does not change, the heart of man. In the last analysis, success in battle is a matter of morale. In all matters which pertain to an army, organization, discipline and tactics, the human heart in the supreme moment of battle is the basic factor.¹³

Senior and operational-level commanders need a knowledge of human behavior and a knowledge of their soldiers' needs.

They can then get the most out of their soldiers in battle. Col (later Brig Gen) S. L. A. Marshall echoed this in *Men Against Fire*, his classic analysis of human behavior in World War II:

The art of leading, in operations large or small, is the art of dealing with humanity, of working diligently on behalf of men, of being sympathetic with them, but equally, of insisting that they make a square facing of their own problems.¹⁴

The commander best serves his soldiers by knowing and meeting their needs in battle—their need for confidence in themselves, their unit and their leadership; their need for security; and their need to know that they do not fight in vain. He serves his unit and the nation by making the most of the moral force he commands.

Knowing the importance of the soldier's heart and mind on the outcome of battle and the great impact that a leader can have on the morale of the soldier, the higher level commander must ensure that his subordinate commanders' first concern is the soldier. To do this, the commander must know his subordinate commanders intimately. He must develop trust and understanding with and among them. Through this mutual understanding, they will develop a cohesion in the command which their soldiers need.

Du Picq wrote, "Solidarity and confidence cannot be improvised. They can be born only of mutual acquaintanceship which establishes pride and makes unity."¹⁵ The

higher level commander serves his soldiers by knowing his subordinate commanders and by developing within them a leadership philosophy which places the battlefield needs of the soldier first.

Moreover, the higher level commander must not allow one who is self-serving to be placed in command or, if in command, to remain. During World War II, Eisenhower wrote of leadership qualities in subordinates:

This is a long tough road we have to travel. The men that can do things are going to be sought out just as surely as the sun rises in the morning. Fake reputations, habits of glib and clever speech, and glittering surface performance are going to be discovered and kicked overboard. Solid, sound leadership with inexhaustible nervous energy to spur on the efforts of lesser men, and ironclad determination to face discouragement, risk, and increasing work without flinching, will always characterize the man who has a sure-enough, bang-up fighting unit. . . . Finally the man has to be able to forget himself and personal fortunes. I've relieved two seniors here because they got to worrying about "injustice," "unfairness," and "prestige. . . ."¹⁶

The effect of allowing the self-serving officer to command in battle can be devastating in terms of both lives and morale. By allowing this, the commander ignores his soldiers and risks defeat. He must know his subordinate commanders and set a climate of leadership in which their soldiers come first. He does this through leadership which cares enough to forgo personal desires and meet the needs of his soldiers. If the commander loses sight of the soldier, he will have little to fight with in battle.

The philosophy is simple—selflessly serve your soldiers to develop a winning unit and a strong nation. Sun Tzu advised:

The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom.¹⁷

Our senior leaders must not forget that the more authority they have, the greater is their responsibility to serve the soldier—and to demand this of their subordinate leaders. Their ambition must be excellence in service, not fame and glory. Their actions, guidance and philosophy of leadership must be aimed at preparing their soldiers to succeed in battle. They must consider the moral as well as the physical effects in battle. In objecting to attempts to rationalize and quantify war, Karl von Clausewitz wrote that strategy comprises:

. . . not only the forces that are susceptible to mathematical analysis; no, the realm of the military art extends wherever in psychology our intelligence discovers a resource that can serve the soldier.¹⁸

It is the soldiers who will fight, and it is they whom the leader must serve. Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, states, "As in the wars of the past . . . American soldiers will fight resolutely when they know and respect their leaders and believe that they are part of a good unit."¹⁹ Soldiers do not want to be pampered; they want to be prepared to win. They want to be part of a winning unit. The selfless leader can make this happen; the self-serving leader cannot. If one is in command to serve his own desires, failure in battle awaits him. To win, the commander serves his soldiers.

Notes

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2. Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-68, *White Paper, 1968, Values: The Bedrock of Our Profession*, June 1996, 8.
3. Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Military Leadership*, 31 October 1983, 89.
4. James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Co., 1968), 174.
5. FM 100-5, *Operations*, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 5 May 1986, 15.
6. Edgar S. Puryear, *Nineteen Stars: A Study in Military Character and Leadership* (Orange, Va.: Green Publishers, 1971), 253.
7. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Eastern Acorn Press, 1967), 54.
8. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1963), 54.
9. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee* (Birmingham, Ala.: Oxmoor House Inc., 1961), 362.
10. *Ibid.*, 376.
11. T. Harry Williams, *McClellan, Sherman and Grant* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976), 11.
12. Sun Tzu, *op. cit.*, 40.
13. Ardant du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Military Publishing Co., 1946), 109.
14. S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Magnolia, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), 160.
15. Du Picq, *op. cit.*, 18.
16. Eisenhower, *op. cit.*, 254.
17. Sun Tzu, *op. cit.*, 53–54.
18. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 10.
19. FM 100-5, *Operations*, *op. cit.*, 5–6.