

The Current State of Marine Corps Leadership

A case for cultural regression

by Maj Stanley E. Bednar

Leadership is a term often employed but seldom grasped. Like the game Othello, the concept of leadership is fairly easy to define (and is done so often) and understand but near impossible to master; this lack of mastery directly attributes to its notion of being an innately “human will” construct. From an educational point of view, no one definition of leadership rises to primacy above others, though there are commonalities across the spectrum that can be cobbled into a generally acceptable and workable definition: the ability to motivate a group of people to accomplish a common goal. That accepted, there was a time in which the Marine Corps proselytized leadership more correctly than not, its leaders once able to balance a storied culture with invigorated and cyclical manpower youth “seed corn”; and yes, my use of the past tense is absolutely purposeful. In its rush to remain current, the Marine Corps has bargained away its institutional character and, because of its nature, potentially sacrificed a large portion of its cultural relevancy.

The Marine Corps has always been unique among the Services, its cultural variance becoming its most stark during the mid to late 20th century (with the

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“You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something.”

—Steve Jobs¹

“The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority.”

—Ken Blanchard²



Junior Marines are the most rotational population in the Marine Corps. (Photo by LCpl Angelica I. Annastas.)

advent of maneuver warfare and the like). This distinction was never about better technology or equipment—it was not a material or resourcing difference. Rather, the Marine Corps distinguished itself with, plainly put, grit. The Corps prides itself on being anchored by traditions, willful, agile, resilient, audacious, and arrogant, with the mindset of “adapt and overcome,” more aligned to a brotherhood than a bureaucratic body. As such, it was able to punch above its weight class, and it could get to the fight sooner than others, sustain that fight for longer than it had any earthly right to, and fight in places none thought possible. Combine those attributes, and you have a scrappy brawler that nobody had an appetite to contend with, foreign or domestic. As altruistic as that sounds, these wholly intangible personality traits are extremely and indelibly tied and slave to the human condition—we are the most “emotive” Service. If leadership is about influencing human will, then logic would follow that the Corps is particularly sensitive to its application, or lack thereof.

“Leadership is hard to define and good leadership even harder. But if you can get people to follow you to the ends of the earth, you are a great leader.”

—Indra Nooyi³

Before highlighting how the Corps may be “rushing to failure” with respect to cultural currency over relevancy, a deeper exploration of the commonly accepted traits of a well-led organization (and, by extension, how teams fail) is prudent. Just as nebulous as a firm definition of leadership, there is no shortage of well-informed opinions regarding what it means to be well led. That said, like its definition, there are commonalities across that bank of opinions: collaboration and communication,

a senior leader’s presence and guidance, a resulting vision and purpose, and satisfied employees. Similarly, negative indicators of a poorly led organization also trend: only management has offices, assigned leaders don’t talk about organizational culture, company values are posted like propaganda, employees are either bored or stressed, and slow decision making, unequal workloads, territorialism, long hours, and poor communication abound. Though these are just a sampling of indicators, generally, all of these traits can be bucketed into three categories: disengagement, a lack of organizational discipline, and little to no member buy-in. The Corps is inadvertently, but certainly, adopting these vectors, even if passively condoned.

“Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak and esteem to all.”

—George Washington⁴

“Desk defile” is a very real element of office and cubicle tactics, even if not formally recognized or codified. Suggested in name, it is literally the act of being covered by one’s desk, as in being so mired in administrivia that a leader’s responsibilities cannot penetrate him. In today’s hyper-connected and immediate-communications world, which has only served to speed up (vice improve) decision making, desk defile has transitioned from a humorous cautionary barb to a very real staff terror. As a young Marine officer, I was told to “drink other people’s coffee” and “if you can, task in person.” In other words, get up and out of your seat, away from your desk, and engage Marines. Not only does this invigorate spirit and refresh *esprit de corps*, it provides subordinates an engaged boss. Through that engagement, and to degrees of effectiveness exponentially greater than written transmission alone, discourse is born, a natural back and forth of thought and opinion that, from leader to led, translates into guidance and vision. In order to effectively lead, an individual must receive the appropriate inputs, process them, and, in the vast majority of the day remaining, engage directly with his Marines to figure out what those inputs mean to the team and determine how they will address them. Anything short of this recipe robs troops of their



Our young Marines must be led well. (Photo by LCpl Jose Villalobos Rocha.)

guiding light, instead facilitating well-meant, but ultimately chaotic, efforts and end states.

"A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus but a molder of consensus."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵

Organizational discipline, not to be confused with the flame of personal discipline largely kept by senior enlisted leadership, is the recognition, adherence, maintenance, and execution of defined work centers and efforts as well as their interaction with one another. It is *not* masking democratic-style asking and consensus-making under the false pretenses of recognition and adherence. Tight organizations and families demand structure regardless of the societal agenda—this is instinct and human nature. Authority and discipline enforce and facilitate recognition and adherence, which, in turn, convince the "body politic" that everybody is held accountable and to standard. After all, as the quip goes, the military defends democracy; it does not practice it. If a study were done on major successful corporations, likely, their members would know intimately who was in charge and exactly what was expected of them, regardless of how avant-garde the company's culture was. Without an authoritative structure, there can be no personal buy-in, no investment; humans would continually wonder who was able to "ask" and would debate their way out of work, fundamentally eroding trust.

Organizational, or familial, trust is a byproduct of shared and appreciated roles and responsibilities—each member of the family is made to "carry their own water." The confidence reaped from enduring a journey with your brother, of your own volition and motivation (vice either of you needing to be carried), fosters buy-in, an ingrained

"Leadership contains certain elements of good management, but it requires that you inspire, that you build durable trust. For an organization to be not just good, but to win, leadership means evoking participation larger than the job description, commitment deeper than any job contract's wording."

—GEN Stanley A. McChrystal, USA(Ret)⁶

investment in and commitment to that family. The opposite is, unfortunately, equally stark; without the knowledge that your fellow Marines shoulder at least similar burdens, true buy-in and trust is simply unattainable. Trust is dubiously the easiest of the three vectors to understand, but it is the most interrelated and dependent on the other two vectors (leadership involvement and organizational discipline) and is most susceptible to human will. In other words, achieving true trust and buy-in necessarily means an organization has already conquered the other two vectors.

I implore you to give some real, honest thought to what you have observed of Marine Corps leadership of late. As I have been assigned to a relatively senior staff, I have obviously come to the conclusion that we may not be getting it institutionally right. We have diverged altruistically from the good commonalities of leadership along those three vectors. As an institution, a family, and a brotherhood, we have attempted to remain so societally current, following the trend of elevating the individual above the collective, that we have virtuously lost our way.

"The Marine Corps is currently not organized, trained, and equipped to meet the demands of a future operating environment."

—Marine Corps Operating Concept⁷

Some may believe that relating the above quote, which topically speaks to the Corps' physical ability to fight, to a largely humanistic intangible like leadership, the engagement between leader and led, is a reach. Every element of being able to galvanize and synergize organization, training, and equipping stems from the relationship between an organization's "brain" (culture, owned

"Amazing. Every word you just said was wrong."

—Luke Skywalker⁸

by the senior leaders) and its "heart" (vitality and personality, owned by the juniors). When I first began exploring the potential leadership pitfalls plaguing our Corps, I started at the heart, assuming it was being weakened by lackadaisical youth. As I read and researched, the institutionally obvious, but less overt, became clear: that the exact opposite of this sentiment was the case. As with the human body, the heart takes cues from the brain, just as young Marines are catalyzed by their senior leaders. And because senior leaders of any organization are the keepers of its culture, the challenge is not generational; it is more deeply rooted than that. The following examples of shortfalls along the previously identified vectors will establish this cultural position while also highlighting how subtly yet indelibly linked our shortfalls are, nefariously so.

1. Unfortunately, one does not have to look far to find very public examples of senior Marines once considered rising star leaders relieved of duty for significant leadership shortcomings. Commander relief is nothing new, but what does seem to be a relatively recent development is the trend in cause of such relief: the abuse of power. Blame social media and the hyper-connected age for making these types of relief more well known, but woe if we ignore the fire simply because more people are noticing the smoke—fire is still fire. That said, leadership relief for cause has taken a darker turn over the past seventeen years of my experience. Relief is bad, regardless, but when I was a junior officer, “cause” types of relief tended to center around unduly familiar “frat boy” or “fast and loose” command environments. Again, bad, but the Marines at least felt loved by their frat-boy CO—there was a loyalty. Today, cause has morphed into senior leaders and commanders being relieved or called to task for taking *advantage* of their Marines, eroding all forms and levels of trust, from organizational down to familial. Not to mention that it’s really hard to provide organizational guidance when one is only looking out for his own skin. While I certainly don’t advocate for a frat-boy family construct, I will forever argue for a present commander who takes a vested interest in his unit *and individual Marines* and who is willing to engage them and provide the guidance we sometimes so sorely need. Doing so, however, means that he may have to turn attention from his seniors and invest it in his subordinates.

2. I can’t form any better argument against consensus-based leadership than what was recently codified by a specific colonel in a very senior leadership and planning billet within HQMC. During discussions and working groups that sought to develop support plans and policies for operation plans, he lamented that decisions made within HQMC are often watered down, belabored, and delayed for one predominant reason: consensus-based decisions. Counterintuitively, the same leaders who

have based their significant military lives around the hierarchical nature of how the Marine Corps fundamentally works (state the problem, solicit input, decide on the course of action, make the plan, and execute), at the apex of their careers, now feel the “leader decides, we execute” construct is up for debate. The original statement by this well-respected colonel was “logistics by consensus.” At the operational and strategic level, guidance essentially equates to senior commanders being given resourcing direction and priorities, only to endlessly debate them, thereby stagnating action. This then morphed the discussion into “leadership by consensus” in general. When did a commander’s “Here are my priorities, and this is my decision,” (so long as those calls were neither illegal nor immoral), become a debatable item? And because the Marine Corps boasts of being a “leadership by example” team, what chance does firm and adhered-to decision making stand the farther down the chain you go if it is first and prominently questioned by senior leadership? If general officers can argue direction, why can’t colonels, lieutenant colonels, or captains? And for those who would argue that the farther up the chain you go, the more pontification and debate is accepted and understood, I counter with this. Not a month after hearing that senior colonel bemoan this decision-making trend, another equally respected colonel told me that a general had asked him to speak to his fellow colonel about “getting onboard with the general’s strategy” because the general was concerned the colonel wasn’t listening to his guidance. What?!

3. From an observational standpoint, buy-in shortfalls largely manifest themselves on opposite ends of the spectrum. On the “big” end, the aforementioned quote from the *Marine Corps Operating Concept* is an obvious indicator that institutional buy-in has largely eluded us, but the situation is actually a bit more dire. Classification sensitivity considered, let’s just say, for argument’s sake, that if the Corps is having a hard time plotting its own

future course, the rest of the joint force is having an equally difficult go at figuring out how to employ us, if at all⁹—to the tune of folks not really beating down the doors for Corps equities and capabilities. Marines have been wooden-hulled sharpshooters, island-hopping vanguards, jungle shock troops, embassy guards, counterinsurgency hold forces, embedded partners, and forward-presence military power emissaries. Ultimately, it does not matter what role we fill; that is determined by our civilian leadership. What does matter is how well we fill that role, and the Marine Corps can only excel if its “whole of being” understands what it is trying to be. Toward the “little” end, it stands to reason that the Corps can’t plot its course because its rowers are equally disenfranchised and confused. Owning to the first two sets of examples covering leader engagement and organizational discipline, the Corps is robbing its junior Marines of an aim point, a standard. This became blatantly and painfully obvious to me when I reviewed a handful of command climate surveys. One of the known “field Marines” (good in the field, troublesome in garrison—a term “no no’d” by policymakers because they didn’t want to believe the phenomenon existed), an EAS’ing corporal, “by named” his response. When I saw this, I immediately assumed his obvious gripe was going to be that the Corps had somehow wronged and harassed him, causing his premature departure from what I’m sure he believed was going to be an illustrious career. Unfortunately, my egregious assumption couldn’t have been farther from the truth. This otherwise motivated, albeit unorthodox, young leader was departing the Corps because we *did not challenge him enough*. He expected the pamphlet, the Corps gave him “summer camp,” and he felt jilted, robbed. In a day and age where individualism is given utmost primacy and value, we, the Corps’ leadership, *must* fight the urge to allow that internal retreat to take root and erode that uncommon *esprit de corps* that young men and women joined up for, that they

couldn't find anywhere else; *that's precisely what made us unique and afforded us grit, that pride in being hard.* While there is no way of getting around the modern cultural trend of "cocooning" behind personal electronic devices, headphones, social media, you name it, we *can* prove to our young warriors that there is more to life *than only* those media, that there is a flesh-and-blood brotherhood that wants their involvement. Once we convince them that such a construct exists, we must cultivate it by bringing back unit social functions outside "normal working hours" and away from the confines of unit spaces. It's okay; the clubs could use the patronage. As Amazon's CEO, Jeff Bezos, recently put it, it isn't a work-life balance you need but work-life "harmony."¹⁰ Balance denotes give and take, while harmony espouses synchronization and satisfaction. In other words, leaders can ardently adhere to "9 to 5" schedules with their Marines, affording them maximum off/individual time, but if those Marines can't get behind what the leaders are offering during the workday, those Marines won't be any happier coming to work. And, as Bezos goes on to note, unhappy and/or unfulfilled work means the Marine, in this instance, takes the negative feelings home, degrading any benefits off-time would have offered. And this *quid pro quo* relationship quickly becomes a downward spiral, a career and opportunity death knell.

"Honesty is the fastest way to prevent a mistake from turning into a failure."

—James Altucher¹¹

There is an April 2013 *Forbes* article titled "12 Signs of Cowardly Leadership."¹² In it, Jeff Schmitt argues that while courageous leadership may be a well-used business cliché or buzzword, its adoption has highlighted the dif-



How we treat our Marines is important to American society. (Photo by LCpl Jose Villalobos Rocha.)

ference between talkers and doers, between the sycophants and phonies and the believers. Schmitt explodes those "simple" three vectors into more detail, but the message is clear and identical to my argument thus far. And, to round it out, there is a risk management article in the July edition of *Inbound Logistics*, "Protecting Your Supply Chain" by Tom Gresham,¹³ which argues that in order for an organization to implement initiative, it must have five elements in place: visible leadership, worker empowerment, knowledge of responsibilities, awareness of the pitfalls and boons of emerging technology, and oversight and intervention—in other words, engaged leadership, organizational discipline, and buy-in.

"Teamwork requires some sacrifice up front; people who work as a team have to put the collective needs of the group ahead of their individual interests."

—Patrick Lencioni¹⁴

Reversing this noble but ultimately misguided "rush to currency" is actually quite easy in spirit, though its execution will likely prove complex and challenging. The ways and means to do so are the foundational blocks of "Leadership 101," which we Marines are indoctrinated with on day one. The real challenge harkens back to the old adage that it is more difficult to start easy and then work harder than it is to come in hard and ease off. Regardless, the shift from this new consensus-based individualism to a more authoritative collectivism must take place.

1. Get away from the desk. So simple to say, seemingly near impossible to execute. However, regardless of the email deluge of belt-fed requests for information and questions and the unending tasks from a host of different management systems, if a leader isn't spending a majority of his time with his led, even 51 percent of his time, then his Marines are being cheated. And, senior leaders, few things come off more disingenuous than forced troop time (like calendar-invited "walkabouts" or exclusive town halls). No, leaders, you need to engage your troops humanly, unannounced, unscripted, naturally, and purely. Only through this engagement will the mind of the leader be translated into guidance the troops can understand, get behind, enforce, and ultimately trust.



Are they also learning to accept responsibility for what they do? (Photo by SSgt Daniel Wetzel.)

2. Once initial walkabouts are completed and guidance starts to take root, follow-on face-to-face engagements should begin to address what the troops are actually doing. Leaders should eventually ask harder questions of their troops than “How’s your spouse?” or “How are the Patriots doing?,” like “What are you working on, and which of my priorities is this addressing?,” “Explain my task to you, in your own words,” “Why are you doing this when it is clear this task belongs to somebody else?,” or “What other section needs to know about what you are doing?” (Here, I am borrowing from “What do I know, who needs to know it, have I told them, and do they understand?”) Aside from the work of “lane maintenance” and “unity through shared pain,” trust will start to manifest through pointed discourse and potentially in a less obvious way. I recently overheard an officemate quip that society expects a lot from youth by way of intellect but demands virtually nothing of responsibility. While less responsibility and a lack of accountability may be very palatable to these youth initially, distrust between senior and subordinate will eventually set in. After all, being treated like a child leads to acting like a child.

3. Once troops are engaged by their leadership, receiving and truly hear-

ing their leader’s guidance, their trust that they are not alone in the fight catalyzed, they will begin to want to buy into the organization, to truly invest more of themselves than normal working hours. Unfortunately, a byproduct of institutional individualism is the concept that an individual’s time is his own, sacrosanct and not to be trifled with. Running a business that entices rotational young blood and that doesn’t necessarily depend on any one employee is fine and, in fact, generally accepted. Loyalty to a singular business is no longer in vogue in the civilian sector, oftentimes thought to equal a lack of cross-sectional experience and growth. In a family, that loyalty is a form of organizational lifeblood. At the very point some leaders and commanders may have begun to enjoy the trust of their subordinates, it has become commonplace not to cap that sentiment with time spent “as a family.” Officer and enlisted club membership is down or dead already. After-hours “staff calls” are allowed to be scoffed at and disregarded. In fact, it has gotten to the point where *any* after-hours function endorsed and mandated by a Marine Corps unit is seen as bothersome and harassing to families in nature. But the Corps is not a normal business, and this family needs time

as well—well beyond the confines of normal working hours. Commanders, not only is it okay to flat mandate after-hours functions (if there is such a thing for a “Marine 24/7” family) but it is absolutely necessary, within moderation and understanding that spouses and kids demand a Marine’s time, too, if a commander wishes to harden that earned trust.

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”

—Marcus Garvey¹⁵

Progress for its own sake is futile at best. In the case of the Marine Corps, this rush to remain socially current has led to cultural ambiguity. The Corps must strive to regain the faith of its civilian leadership by rekindling that *je ne sais quoi* that once differentiated us from our bigger Army and Air Force brothers. To do this, it must relight the trust of its Marines, the kind of familial trust born of mutual respect, common goals, buy-in, and a sincere brotherhood mentality. That trust will stem from a reinstitutionalization of disciplined work and shared responsibility. And that “row well and live” mantra can only be inculcated by the overt presence of strong senior leadership and tempered, translated, and advanced by those youthful and vital junior leaders. The Marine Corps can revisit and reap, once again, this quirky, cult-like mentality and more, just as it has in the past, when this plucky, altruistic family found itself at similar cultural crossroads, and it will do so through grit.

Notes

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ENABLING CONTROL FROM ASHORE: RAYTHEON'S NAVAL STRIKE MISSILE

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A stealthy missile, NSM flies at sea-skimming altitude, has terrain-following capability and uses an advanced seeker for precise targeting in challenging conditions. It has low observable qualities, with a

passive seeker that helps it avoid detection by enemy radars. The weapon is also currently in use by land forces in Poland.

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