

# Leadership in Depth

Setting our Marines up for success

by 1stLt YiCheng S. Garrard

Platoon commanders represent a subset of leadership that is unique in the Marine Corps. Often entering the fleet and leading Marines who are senior to them in age and experience, second lieutenants are immediately responsible for their performance, conduct, and welfare. While this can be intimidating, platoon commanders can accomplish their missions with greater ease and take care of their Marines at the same time by applying easily forgotten yet time-tested principles.

*Commander's guidance.* A brilliant plan that cannot be communicated is nothing more than a wish. Having a solid commander's intent and guidance can save a leader a tremendous amount of headache and unit confusion by establishing a clear set of expectations and intent for a commander's Marines to execute without hesitation. By giving Marines our intent and expectations and *communicating* it clearly, we allow them to act unhesitatingly and violently in a decentralized manner that produces results far faster and superior to a course of action dominated by uncertainty and top-down decision making. In keeping with understanding and carrying out the commander's intent two levels above us<sup>1</sup>, when drafting our commander's guidance we should seek out that of our immediate commander's and nest it with his. Similarly, we must demand that our subordinate leaders draft their own guidance down to the lowest level to ensure that we are empowering them and, in doing so, giving them a sense of responsibility and buy in. Too often when giving an order we fail to communicate our intent and end state sufficiently because, while we know exactly what they are, we sometimes unknowingly leave out key details and expect our Marines to

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be able to fill in the gaps. Marines are not mind readers. It is unfair to them when we task them with a project, they execute it to the requirements that we gave them, and we send it back to the drawing board because it was not what we wanted. This can be extrapolated to our Marines' individual performances as well. If a Marine is not performing to our expectations, he should not be reading about it for the first time in his fitness report or pros and cons. We must have the moral courage to correct him immediately.

*Simplify complex ideas.* Nothing is more mind numbing and time wasting than having to hear something that is so

complicated that even Einstein would feel clueless. GEN Stanley McChrystal was once shown a PowerPoint slide on military strategy in Afghanistan that was so complicated that it resembled a bowl of spaghetti, to which he said, "When we understand this slide, we will have won the war."<sup>2</sup> Too often, we eagerly tackle problems by unintentionally applying the most complex solution because we fall victim to the good idea fairy by piling on the first ideas that come to mind without an appreciation for the big picture. Instead, we should take the complexity of the problem, organize it into a single idea that serves as a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything.<sup>3</sup> This is known as the Hedgehog Concept, a very successful model used by people, companies, and organizations to solve the most complex problems. Adam Smith and the division of labor, Einstein and the theory of relativity, Apple and comput-



**Marines should not read about their performance shortfalls for the first time in their fitrep or pro and con marks. They should be corrected immediately. (Photo by Cpl James Marchetti.)**

ing made simple are just a handful of examples. However, we must keep in mind that simple does not always mean right. As leaders, it is our job to take a step back, see the big picture, identify the root causes, reduce it, and create a simple and effective solution.

*Be open minded.* In today's fast changing world, the Marine Corps is constantly facing and battling new challenges every day. As we make the transition from a wartime Corps to one of peace, the ability to handle issues correctly from the get-go is more important now than ever. To face these challenges, we as leaders should encourage and instill a culture of innovation, creativity, and risk taking down to the lowest ranks. Unfortunately, in bureaucratic organizations there are sometimes rules and regulations that exist to serve a specific purpose at its time of conception but have not been updated to reflect the changing times. The Marine Corps is a living and breathing entity that must make changes from time to time, and it is our duty to be bold by having the moral courage to speak up when change is necessary. Great leaders do not surround themselves with only "yes men." As individuals we may feel unconfident in our decisions, but if we only surround ourselves with people who agree with us or are afraid to speak up, we are much more prone to making poor decisions and failing at our job. Instead, we must be willing to tolerate respectful dissent and invite those of differing opinions into the discussion. The character of the leader has a huge impact on the group dynamic, and we owe it to our Marines to leave our pride at the door and be willing to listen and learn. In doing so, we create a climate of initiative, buy in, and ownership that will translate into better morale, higher productivity, and *esprit de corps*.

*Taking care of our Marines and the mission.* Training and education can have a huge impact on not just our units' performance but also the individual Marine's career. The saying that "we are as strong as our weakest link" is seen when we have a few individual Marines who excel at their jobs and everyone else is mediocre or lagging. As a result, it may feel natural to give those few spots



**Platoon commanders are immediately responsible for their platoon's performance, conduct, and welfare, while many of the platoon members are older than their lieutenant.** (Photo by Cpl James Marchetti.)

for follow-on schools to the strong individuals, but in doing so we are actually doing a disservice to our units and the other Marines. Repeatedly investing in the same Marine while denying others the same opportunities is akin to putting all of our eggs in one basket. What happens when that Marine changes duty stations or leaves active service? Instead, we can take care of everyone by spread loading learning opportunities while at the same time rewarding

strong performers by putting them in leadership roles or challenging them with tasks that call for creativity and a high level of performance. Ultimately, a unit will have much higher morale, fewer discipline problems, and increased productivity when every person down to the lowest rank is being challenged and rewarded.

*Train to improve, not perform.* With the reality of reduced funding for training already being felt across the fleet, it



**Focus on improving their abilities, not creating robots.** (Photo by Cpl James Marchetti.)

may be tempting to run the ever shrinking number of exercises as flawlessly as possible in order to chalk them up as successes. However, the Marine Corps does not need robots who can execute a brilliantly written order down to the last detail as exactly as planned. The past decade of war has demonstrated the effects of the strategic corporal with ever increasing frequency and severity. Gone are the days when battalion, company, or platoon commanders were ever present and had a hand in everything. Instead, units are operating at the lowest level with increasing dispersion, and squad and team leaders are being asked to shoulder mounting responsibilities. As a result, their commanders must put an ever increasing level of trust in them. This trust, however, does not and should not come automatically. We can test our Marines during exercises by introducing friction during the execution of a carefully detailed order. By always maintaining the mindset that

the purpose of rehearsals and exercises is to *improve*, not *perform*, we not only take care of our Marines by acclimating them to friction and uncertainty but learn things about them that may otherwise go unnoticed or unknown.

The United States Marine Corps has earned the status as the finest warfighting organization in the world, but it has not achieved this because of its fancy uniforms or flashy swords alone. Often operating undermanned and under-equipped in the harshest climate and place, Marines have thrived due to their unparalleled ferocity and tenacity. As leaders, we must be good stewards to both our Marines and the institution by cultivating the warrior culture while finding new and creative ways to do our jobs better. We should strive to positively influence our subordinates, peers, and superiors and teach our Marines to do the same. By communicating our intent clearly, simplifying complex ideas, being open minded, taking care of our

Marines and the mission, and training them to improve and not perform, we can do our part as platoon commanders to prepare our Marines to do the best they can in the worst situations.

#### Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington DC: 1997).
2. Staff Writer, "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is PowerPoint," *The New York Times*, (New York: 26 April 2010).
3. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001).



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