

Leadership Purpose

Cohesive philosophy and perspective on leadership is essential

by 1stLt Austin Lynum

Many Marines spend a large portion of their time in the Marine Corps struggling with depression, anger, and lack of purpose. Often, they remember why they joined but still become disenfranchised. As leaders, it is easy for us to fall into this trap as well. When this happens, we can look back to the Marine Corps' leadership philosophy to refresh our world view, gain some motivation and purpose, and recalibrate our leadership compasses.

While searching our leadership philosophy, you might notice a discrepancy in our doctrine. There is a mismatch in text between *MCWP 6-11* and the *Marine Corps Manual*, and it is not trivial. It aptly illustrates an issue consistently seen in junior leaders and senior leaders alike—our purpose is lacking. Specifically, there is one subparagraph in the *Marine Corps Manual* that was changed for the worse. Paragraph 1100, subparagraph 1, of the *Marine Corps Manual* should be deliberately revisited because it is sorely lacking in its present form. To inform our deliberations, we should look to the version of the same subparagraph stated within *MCWP 6-11*. This article provides views on our leadership purpose in an attempt to kickstart the conversation.

The current "Purpose and Scope" of Marine Corps Leadership is defined in one sentence: "The objective of Marine Corps Leadership is to develop the leadership qualities of Marines to enable them to assume progressively greater responsibilities to the Marine Corps and society."¹ Nothing in this sentence is inherently disagreeable, but it is significantly less engaging than the version in *Leading Marines* below:

1. Purpose and Scope
 - a. The primary goal of Marine Corps leadership is to instill in all Marines

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It is every leader's responsibility to sustain the warrior spirit in their Marines. (Photo by Cpl Luke Kuennen.)

the fact that we are warriors first. The only reason the United States of America needs a Marine Corps is to fight and win wars. Everything else is secondary. In North China in 1937, Captain Samuel B. Griffith said, "Wars and battles are not lost by private soldiers. They win them, but don't lose them. They are lost by commanders, staffs, and troop leaders, and they are often lost long before they start." Our leadership training is dedicated to the purpose of preparing those commanders, staffs, and troop leaders to lead our Marines in combat.²

It is unfortunate that we are left with such a baseless shell of a purpose, especially when the previous version was so descriptive and engaging. Likewise, it shows us a tangible root to our beliefs and a clear delineation of what all officers know as the burden of command. The failure of an enterprise is never on the backs of our Marines but rests solely on leadership. In this realization, we gain the understanding of the importance of effective leadership throughout the ranks. Lackluster leaders will be the cause of failure, which is unacceptable because "Marines and

the Corps do not fail ... the Corps must succeed.”³

It is also interesting how great the contrast is between these two purposes. One is “to instill in all Marines the fact that we are warriors first,”⁴ emphasizing the individual character of all Marines within the group—which *Leading Marines* takes so much time and passion to articulate. It comes full circle logically and in good form.

The new purpose of Marine Corps leadership does not tie it to any external logical structure but feeds back into itself. If your purpose in life is to live for the sake of living, then what is your purpose? Yes, it is to live, but what does that even mean? This circular logic is akin to a self-licking ice cream cone. If the objective of Marine Corps leadership truly is “to develop the leadership qualities of Marines,” we are already in a logical loop. How is our purpose solely to perpetuate the means of reaching our purpose? Someone will have to do some critical thinking to get us out of this one. Continuing to read, we get a purpose to our objective, which is good; it is that hint of critical thinking we need. Unfortunately, it is telling us that the only point of developing our leadership qualities is to enable us to take on more responsibility.

Leading Marines tells us, “Stars, bars, or chevrons are only indicators of the responsibility or authority we hold at a given time.”⁵ Considering that our own philosophy holds rank as an indicator of responsibility, is our ultimate purpose as leaders to climb the ladder to the highest rank possible? Is our failure to promote to the next rank our ultimate defeat?

The phrase “responsibilities to the Marine Corps and society” provides a hint at the context necessary to get us out of the circular logic we would otherwise fall prey to. From this phrase, we could build the requirements of leadership that form our underlying purpose. Specifically focusing on our definitions of the Marine Corps and society, we can develop our context and foundation for leadership, assuming that our definitions for each term are strong and universally known to Marine leaders. Considering the gravity of the assump-

tions that need to be made in this situation, the benefit of including the phrase “responsibilities to the Marine Corps and society” is outdone by the ambiguity it leaves on the table—unless we include the definitions of these terms.

Our previous leadership purpose gave us an inherently palatable and logical basis for its observance. There is a strong statement of fact that—in good Marine Corps fashion—denies dispute, basing our leadership on amplifying the warrior spirit of our Marines. As previously stated, many Marines remember why they joined but still feel disenfranchised. Most of those Marines joined partly for the warrior spirit they saw in the Marines. There is a consistent trend of Marines getting into hellish fights and coming out the other side with a win, whether that is in a bar or on a battlefield. That appeals to a lot of combative young men and women. It is part of the warrior archetype Steven Pressfield talks about extensively in *The Warrior Ethos*. Then we join the Marines; we get away from the fight of boot camp, Officer Candidate School, and The Basic School; and we lose sight of our warrior spirit. *Leading Marines* says, “there is an unnatural feeling of being ‘left out’ among [Marines] not able to go”⁶ when other Marines are in the fight. This extends to any time a Marine is not in the fight, unless our leaders are able to remind us and refocus us on our inherent warrior spirit.

From the perspective of, say, a communications unit in the air wing, it is easy to fall back to the mindset of a uniformed bureaucrat that fulfills a niche foreign policy requirement. The challenge is finding a nested, functional purpose that survives the reality of support units and maintains the combative mindset of the warrior spirit that allows us to fight failure. We are not the 0311’s finding a way to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy. Our job is to support them, so how do we make a support mission into a fight? There are sustaining and shaping aspects to support missions, but are there also decisive aspects? With some critical thinking, it is not hard to find decisive aspects of all occupational fields, so they need to be emphasized to engage our warriors.

The fight against failure is a real thing in any specialty, so keep the standards high, explain the purpose, and define success and failure for the warriors you lead. The old purpose and scope contain a quote by then-Capt Samuel B. Griffith, explaining the burden of command as discussed before: the Marines win battles and wars, but their leaders lose them. This is the basis and motivation for the ultimate focus of leadership, which is preparing to lead in combat so that we win every time. There is no place for failure, so we must constantly fight it. This is aptly covered in all venues of leadership training, but for some reason, it is not applied in the operating forces to the extent it should be. To help improve the quality of our leaders, the stated purpose of Marine Corps Leadership, as defined in the *Marine Corps Manual*, must be changed to accurately reflect the end state for effective Marine leaders—winning in combat.

Good leaders would rather not be leaders if success is defined by promotion because gaining rank does not win the fight. Rank has nothing to do with their reasons for joining. They joined to be part of the best corps of warriors in the world, to fight, and to be mentors and role models to their Marines. They would rather define success as effective and responsive support to the Marines in contact so that they win every time. For this reason, we need to reexamine the purpose of Marine Corps leadership to support the warfighter, not ourselves.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Manual*, (Washington, DC: 1980).
2. *Marine Corps Manual*, Paragraph 1100, as it appears in the appendices of Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: 2002).
3. *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*.
4. *Marine Corps Manual*.
5. *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*.
6. Ibid.

