But First, You Must Lead Yourself
When nothing is everything
by Maj Christopher M. Davis

Each year, approximately 1,200 freshly minted second lieutenants stand in front of a platoon for the first time, ready to lead their Marines through the perilous challenges the Service demands.

Some of these young leaders will be more successful than others. The most successful young officers recognize that great leaders know how to lead themselves.

GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower defined leadership as “the art of getting someone else to do something that you want done because he wants to do it.” Leaders inspire others to embrace the organization’s goals as their own. Effective leaders have a clear understanding of their own goals and principles before leading the group toward accomplishing their task. Clarity, conviction of purpose, and moral courage will sustain a leader through adversity.

Self-leadership is one of the most important investments you can make as a leader. It is challenging; it requires humility and a deliberate effort of constant evaluation and growth. Great leaders do not put themselves in front so that they may cross the finish line before others. Rather, great leaders bring the group across the finish line alongside them. We are leaders for others, and we owe those entrusted to our care to be the best version of ourselves. A leader who engages in self-leadership views every mistake and failure as an opportunity for growth.

Self-Awareness
In my experience, people will not follow leaders who fail to first lead themselves. Leading from an authoritative title or position will only take us so far. We must strive for clarity in understanding our own capabilities and the challenges we face—our own strengths and weaknesses—and build a foundation from there.

Help comes from within, not from without.
—T.E. Lawrence

One way to gain self-awareness is through physical adversity. Physical suffering strips us down to bare fundamentals and humbles us. We cannot hide from it. When faced with physical adversity, we have to decide who we are and what we are going to do—sometimes to survive.

Mike Tyson once said, “Everyone has a plan until you get punched in the mouth.” More eloquently stated, no plan ever survives first contact with the enemy. Commonly, this is reflected as one’s “fight or flight” reaction, and that enemy can be on the battlefield or inside ourselves. We must always seek clarity and self-awareness if we are to positively contribute to our surroundings.

Self-awareness also comes through reflection. We need to reflect on the crucibles of life—past and present—and how we deal with them. Those experiences can teach us about our character. In moments of triumph, we can recognize patterns worthy of replication. Consequently, these reflections might also serve as metrics in our lives that identify areas needing improvement or requiring our attention.

Former Secretary of Defense (and former Marine Corps general) James N. Mattis explained, “One source of a leader’s strength comes from having some degree of reflective ability.” He added, “Solitude allows you to reflect while others are reacting.” It is almost providential that a similar high-ranking
Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power. If you realize you have enough, you are truly rich.

—Lao Tzu

In May 2014, ADM William McRaven became an overnight YouTube sensation following his commencement address at the University of Texas. Despite a noteworthy career spanning four decades—which included the command of Joint Special Operations Command in 2011, a posting responsible for the raid that killed Osama bin Laden—the ten million views he received from his speech brought his name and the accompanying message to anyone with a smart phone.

Leaning on the University's slogan, "What starts here changes the world," ADM McRaven shared ten principles he learned while serving as a Navy SEAL, that helped him overcome challenges, both inside and outside of the military. Each principle was important to his message, but he started with a lesson about self-discipline for a reason—its importance cannot be overstated. Leadership over our own self helps us change ourselves and the world for the better.

Before people can change the world, they have to first "make [their] bed." McRaven pointed out that waking up and making our bed, first thing every morning, demonstrates self-discipline. This discipline ensures that we accomplish the first task of the day. Accomplishing one task will lead to another and another after that. With a simple disciplined act, such as making our bed, we can chart a path for success for ourselves.

Military life is full of structure. For most of us, the rigid routine that civilians praise is not optional. It is forced through strict regulations of military formations, annual training requirements, and uniform policies, all of which leave little room for creativity. Lacking the self-discipline to successfully adhere to these restrictions is a recipe for a short career. Conversely, developing a routine and having the discipline to adhere to that routine has tremendous rewards, even outside of the military.

**Ductus Exemplo (Leadership by Example)**

Effectively leading ourselves means that we hold ourselves to a higher standard of accountability than others. This requires us to be exceptionally aware of making good decisions, acting decisively at the right time, and exercising restraint when appropriate. Each of these requires character and self-discipline. As John C. Maxwell, a preeminent author and lecturer on leadership, states:

*When we are foolish, we want to conquer the world. When we are wise, we want to conquer ourselves. This begins when we do what we should, no matter how we feel about it.*

Marines must demonstrate self-discipline regardless of circumstances. (Photo by Cpl Leynard Kyle Plaza)
Discipline and standards are a two-way street. GEN George S. Patton, Jr., once extolled, “There is only one sort of discipline—perfect discipline. If you do not enforce and maintain discipline, you are potential murderers.” While the General was not trying to suggest failure to enforce proper margins on a memorandum or the rendering of a crisp salute might result in death, he did believe that once a leader has allowed his standards to erode, there is little to halt that erosion. As a leader, I once often mentioned, “Failure to enforce the standard creates a new standard.” We lose our credibility if we fail to hold subordinates consistently accountable for digressing from established standards and policies. It all matters.

Sometimes knowing when not to act is harder. President Abraham Lincoln had the discipline to restrain himself, even in the face of an overwhelming external pressure to act. On 14 July 1863, eleven days after the Union Army’s victory at Gettysburg, the Confederate Army led by Gen Robert E. Lee was in disarray and disoriented by defeat. Lee directed his army south toward the Potomac River, the national boundary between the Union and Confederate states, seeking refuge in Virginia. By the time Lee’s army reached the northern banks of the river, it was impassable as a result of the unrelenting summer rains that had recently affected the region. Lee’s army was trapped.

Lincoln immediately wired Gen George Meade, commander of the Union Army, to surround Lee at the river’s edge and force his surrender. Lincoln knew this action might effectively cease the deadliest war in the Nation’s history. The battles of Chickamauga, Chattanooga, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Saylor’s Creek, and Appomattox, not to mention numerous other smaller skirmishes, might have never occurred. But Meade elected not to pursue Lee. This hesitation to act must have been excruciating for Lincoln, who recognized the gravity of this opportunity to bring the Nation’s suffering—and his own—to an end.

In the days following Gen Meade’s failure, Lincoln penned a scathing letter of reprimand expressing his frustration:

Major General Meade …
I am very—very—grateful to you for the magnificent success you gave the cause of the country at Gettysburg; and I am sorry now to be the author of the slightest pain to you …

The case, summarily stated is this: You fought and beat the enemy at Gettysburg, and, of course, to say at the least, his loss was as great as yours. He retreated, and you did not, as it seemed to me, pressingly pursue him; but a flood in the river detained him, till, by slow degrees, you were again upon him. You had at least twenty thousand veteran troops directly with you, and as many more raw ones within supporting distance … while it was not possible that he received a single recruit, and yet you stood and let the flood run down, bridges be built, and the enemy move away at his leisure, without attacking him.

Again, my dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee’s escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely … and your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.

The letter was found sealed in Lincoln’s desk when his effects were inventoried following his assassination. The words “never sent or signed” were scribbled across the exterior. Remarkably, despite the dire straits in which Lincoln found himself, it was his own ability to retain his emotional balance in the most difficult situations that exemplified his self-discipline. His purpose in writing the letter was not to communicate with Meade but to hold himself to the standard he expected of his own leadership. The Union would fight another day and ultimately win the war. In the meantime, he set a new and greater standard.

We each find inspiration in those sterling examples we observe in others. To effectuate change, we must accept that self-improvement is an inherently personal process, namely a measure of the “self as is” (our actual self) in comparison to our “self that might be” (the ideal self). Thus, the true measure of our own self-worth is in our perceived movement toward the ideal self.

From a professional standpoint, investing in those we lead is essential to the health of our organizations. Although, before we can effectively invest in others, it is important to work on purposefully pursuing our personal and professional goals while investing time in perfecting our own craft. In Outliers: The Story of Success, author Malcom Gladwell provides an insightful compilation of stories and anecdotes about individuals throughout history who, by all accounts, became tremendous leaders in many professional fields. Gladwell emphasizes the value of work by introducing what he labels the “10,000-hour rule.” Under this rule, Gladwell proposes that the mastery of particular skills requires 10,000 hours. This, he explains, applies to playing a guitar, writing music, or computer programming.

Gladwell cites the Beatles and Bill Gates among his examples of his theory. In 1960, the Beatles, a group comprised of British high school friends, were invited to play in Hamburg, Germany. Although they performed in strip clubs where the pay was terrible, the acoustics were not good, and the audience paid little attention to their acts, the Beatles gained valuable experience and perfected their live performance. By the time the Beatles began experiencing major success in 1964, they had nearly 1,200 live performances to their credit. Comparably, most accomplished bands today will never perform 1,200 times in their entire careers.

Before Gates became a risk-taking entrepreneur and genius whose super-
rior intellectual abilities made him the richest man in the world, he logged thousands of hours programming on computers at the University of Wash-

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The process of moving between our actual self and our ideal self requires an investment in ourselves. There is potential to do an immeasurable number of things for the world when we set our mind to it. Before we can most effectively lead an organization, we must ensure we are the best version of ourselves—or growing closer every single day. Take time to invest in yourself.

Notes
4. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
9. “University of Texas at Austin 2014 Commencement Address.”
12. Carl Rogers, Barry Stevens, Eugene Gendlin, John Shlien, and William Van Dusen, Person To Person: The Problem Of Being Human; A New Trend In Psychology, (Ontario, Canada: Condor Books, 1967). This work presented the idea of “self as is” as compared to “self that might be” in its theory of congruence.
15. Ibid.