

Discipline

The top performer's true talent

by LtCol Aaron C. Lloyd

If the meaning of discipline is misunderstood, it can conjure up negative images of punishment and criticism. It can trouble those not yet indoctrinated in the culture of the Corps, and yet it forms the foundation for all that Marines hold dear. In the Corps, discipline manifests as the ability to act as one body toward a common purpose, regardless of obstacles, and forms the bedrock of our collective "Marine-ness." This unique quality is not rigorously emphasized in our search for talent, yet it is so integral to our collective identity. A bumper sticker belief is not enough; the lifestyle of the disciplined warfighter—the Marine—must be the standard. All Marines know this. The Corps should emphasize discipline as a non-negotiable quality required of all Marines and evaluate its prominence in the force. Success flows from discipline; failure flourishes in the fertile ground of its absence.

Discipline is recognized outside of the Corps as important as well. Professor Angela Duckworth, a MacArthur Fellow and psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, describes two attributes she believes are more predictive of success than measures of cognitive ability:

Self-control—the voluntary regulation of behavioral, emotional, and attentional impulses, and grit—the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward long-term goals. A major difference between the two qualities is that grit equips individuals to pursue especially challenging aims over years and even decades, while self-control operates at a more micro timescale in the battle against what could be referred to as 'hourly temptations.'¹

The attributes that Professor Duckworth lists should be familiar to Marines. They sound strikingly like a description of self-discipline, or more

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"There is only one sort of discipline—PERFECT DISCIPLINE. Men cannot have good battle discipline and poor administrative discipline. Discipline is based on pride in the profession of arms, on meticulous attention to details, and on mutual respect and confidence. Discipline must be a habit so engrained that it is stronger than the excitement of battle or the fear of death."

—LTG G.S. Patton

Discipline means subjection; but not subjection to officers (or seniors). It means subjection of the body to the mind; it means the superiority of the human spirit to the last efforts of wind and weather, and the demons of fear, pain, and fatigue. It is the element of Stoicism without which no man can do his living well.

**—William E. Hocking
Morale and Its Enemies (1918)**

simply put for purposes of this article, discipline. This quality is an enabler that allows individuals to develop the other skills and attributes the Corps requires in its Marines. While this information is interesting, its practical use is more pertinent. If discipline forms the foundational basis for developing skills and talents—and is also predic-

tive of success in a tangible way—the Marine Corps could incorporate that understanding into its accessions, evaluations, and retention programs. To this end, there are several things the Corps can either execute or examine regarding discipline to better exploit the advantages that this attribute brings to the force.

First, the Marine Corps should reaffirm the value of discipline and categorically state that the Corps desires this characteristic in its members. At Marine Corps recruit training battalions and Officer Candidates School, the senior drill instructor and platoon sergeant introduce themselves to the new recruits or candidates with a speech that speaks straight to the soul of the matter. The speech declares, “Discipline is the hallmark of a Marine!” That sentiment must be etched on a new Marine’s soul for all time.

Searing this belief on every Marine’s psyche, however, is harder than simply announcing one’s intent. Discipline is rarely discussed after recruit training and Officer Candidates School, and, if so, it is quickly dismissed. It may be that discipline is taken for granted—and that is a mistake (and perhaps solid ground for another article in itself). Instead, the Corps is currently trying to cultivate the ever-ubiquitous talent; the Corps must first attempt to determine if talent is a legitimate determinant of success.

Second, understanding how discipline enables both a unit and an individual’s success is vital. Everything we do should be oriented toward increasing operational and combat effectiveness. With that in mind, Marines understand that the willing suppression of personal

desire for the benefit of the greater good is a requirement for the pursuit of success. Collective discipline facilitates combat operations through individual sacrifice. Units execute smartly and Marines are expected to endure physical and mental privation to accomplish the mission. The individual Marine must be willing to recognize that doing what is convenient or easy is not always in the best interests of the mission and their comrades.

Third, the Corps must continue its efforts to build discipline in its ranks. The majority of training that occurs in the Operating Forces addresses the requirements designed to increase its effectiveness in combat. There is also a significant focus on safety, liberty incident reduction, family readiness, and personal responsibility. While some would assert that discipline is inherent in everything Marines do, the reality of the situation is less clear. Little regular training directly addresses discipline. This apparent lack of focus on training to be disciplined is concerning. The Corps must directly address what *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, says about discipline:

Our form of discipline is *absolute*. There is no time off. Someone else may be in charge, but that does not absolve us from the responsibility to do everything we can do to achieve the common goal.²

To develop discipline, Marines must first recognize the value it has for the Corps and make a conscious effort to recognize its presence, absence, or deficiency.

One way discipline is created is through hard and realistic training in an environment closely approximating operational scenarios. This method falls short, however, if it does not directly confront the value of cohesion. *MCRP 6-11D* insists “the subordination of self and an intuitive understanding of the collective actions of the unit and the importance of teamwork, *results in increased combat power* (author’s emphasis).”³ There is a collective guilt and shared responsibility built into Marines that enhances operational proficiency. Marines will not let each other down if avoidable, hence the old adage about fighting for the Marine on his left and right. Additionally, insisting on and noting deficiencies in discipline is imperative. Tried and true leadership techniques can grow and refine these qualities. To identify, recruit, train, and retain individuals with this most important quality, the Corps must first determine that discipline is the driver behind Marine Corps success, not some other innate or nebulous talent.

Additionally, in line with identifying, assessing, and growing disciplined Marines, understanding that developing high-performing Marines does not happen quickly is important. Discipline could be a natural individual characteristic, but more likely, and similar to leadership, it is a combination of the innate and learned when saddled with opportunity or need. There is no substitute for experience and maturity when it comes to making sound and reasoned decisions. An emphasis on discipline will inevitably lead to the betterment of all Marines.

It is undeniable that discipline (the combination of grit, self-control, and self-discipline) is extremely valuable—action must follow. One promising course is assessing these qualities in new accessions, and in our Marines, to assist in determining who to assess and who to retain. Professor Duckworth has developed grit tests—tools to determine the amount of grit and self-control an indi-



There is no substitute for experience and maturity. (Photo by Cpl Shannon Kroening.)

vidual possesses.⁴ While rudimentary and probably not optimal with regard to the Marine Corps' purposes right now, these tests could certainly be used as a starting point for developing a more comprehensive application appropriate for the Corps. Adding the results of a refined grit test could have numerous positive effects on the Corps. First, these tests, properly integrated, could reduce first term attrition by ensuring the accession of the right Marine at the point of entry, thereby eliminating risk at the source. Second, the Corps could refine MOS assignments. A highly refined grit test could assist in assigning Marines to the most appropriate MOS for the individual. Longer train and sustain pipelines and highly technical MOS could benefit from carefully selected, self-disciplined Marines. Third, using the results of these tests could enhance the promotion and retention processes if carefully balanced against the risk that Marines would begin giving the "right" answer instead of an accurate answer. While the test would not be a singular determinant of promotion or retention, it could inform better decisionmaking by selection boards and career planners. By improving the manner in which the Corps recruits, assigns, retains, and promotes Marines, the overall combat effectiveness of the Corps is enhanced.

Finally, another tangible step the Corps could take is to institute an adjustment to the fitness report. Inserting guidance into paragraphs 12 and 14 of Chapter 4 of the Performance Evaluation System (*Marine Corps Order 1610.7*), directing reporting seniors and reviewing officers to specifically comment on the self-discipline of the Marine being reported on within the Section I and K, certainly holds promise. This adjustment would add another level of insight to promotion, selection, and retention boards' efforts to identify the most qualified Marines. The adjustment would be less intrusive than inserting another lettered evaluation block that would impose software development and monetary costs on the Corps. Additionally, it enhances the markings regarding "effectiveness under stress" and "setting the example," in Section E and F of the fitness report.⁵



Success flows from discipline, which is not necessarily punishment and criticism. (Photo by Cpl Shannon Kroening.)

By directing the reporting senior and reviewing officer to evaluate discipline in their personnel, Marines would be incentivized to recognize its presence or absence within themselves and adjust their behavior accordingly.

The Marine Corps has an opportunity to capitalize on something that appears self-evident. Discipline is a force multiplier. To access and retain the best Marines possible, the Corps should use every tool in its arsenal. Retaining a Marine who is highly skilled

Discipline is force multiplier.

in a specific area but does not have the discipline to face disappointment and make the requisite sacrifices necessary for the Corps' success is just as bad as not retaining a Marine in the first place. As the Marine Corps moves forward facing threats from both nation states and rogue actors, the individual Marine remains the most potent instrument of victory. To maintain its edge over all enemies, the Marine Corps should reaffirm the belief that it is not talent in its most ubiquitous form but rather discipline, grit, and self-control that allows the Corps to fight and win on the battlefield today and tomorrow. Em-

phasizing these qualities as vital to the Corps' success will assist the Nation's shock troops in continuing to be the most ready when the Nation is least ready.

Notes

1. The MacArthur Foundation, "MacArthur Fellows Program," (Chicago, IL: 10 December 2015), accessed at <http://www.macfound.org>.
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 30 July 1997), 97.
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, (Washington, DC: 28 June 1999), 31.
4. Dr. Angela Duckworth, "The Duckworth Lab," (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania), accessed 22 February 2016 at <https://sites.sas.upenn.edu>.
5. Commandant of the Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Order 1610.7, Performance Evaluation System*, (Washington, DC: 13 February 2015), 4-28-4-31.

