

# Hypocrisy

A misunderstood aspect of leadership?

by Maj Nathan Wood

***“Hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue.”  
—Francois de La Rochefoucauld***

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There are few things worse, in the eyes of a Marine, than hypocrisy. Hypocrisy—saying one thing while believing or doing another—is the polar opposite of what may be the most revered Marine Corps leadership trait: integrity. No Marine would claim to be a hypocrite, nor stand to be called one. Those are fighting words.

Yet, the uncomfortable truth is that to be a leader, one must become a hypocrite. The two go hand in hand. A full understanding of leadership, therefore,

is incomplete without an understanding of hypocrisy. It may be the case that hypocrisy is just as important an aspect of leadership as any of the more familiar—and more honorable—leadership traits.

## Why Leaders Are Hypocrites

Why are leaders hypocrites? For the simple reason that no leader, however virtuous, can always live up to the standards that he believes in and champions. Even Chesty Puller must have had moments of cowardice, however fleeting. Even George Washington must have lied on occasion. But in order to effec-

tively lead their organizations, leaders *must* demand that others consistently meet the standards; indeed, the hallmark of good leaders is that they reliably set and enforce high expectations for their subordinates.

This is the very definition of hypocrisy—saying one thing (meet the standards) while doing another (failing to meet them, at least occasionally).

Any parent understands this dynamic. Even the best parents routinely require their children to meet behavioral standards that they fall short of themselves. That is to say nothing of parents (myself included) who require their children to meet behavioral standards that the parents failed to meet when they were kids. Parental hypocrisy, “do as I say, not as I do (or did),” is the same sort of hypocrisy that even the very best leaders exhibit.

## Good vs. Bad Hypocrisy

There are two types of hypocrisy, one much worse than the other. On one end of the spectrum is hypocrisy that is intentional and deceitful—when a person professes to believe one thing while knowingly and deliberately conducting themselves to the contrary. Think of the public figure (real-life examples abound) who decries the moral decay of society while cheating on his spouse behind closed doors. This type of hypocrisy has no place in the Marine Corps.

But there is another form of hypocrisy. I will call it “good hypocrisy,” but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is neither good nor bad, but simply unavoidable: when humans try their best to impose and enforce standards of conduct yet predictably fall short, hypocrisy is the result. Good hypocrisy is a far cry from the flagrant hypocrisy of the cheater in the previous paragraph; rather, it is the well-intentioned hypoc-



***No leader, however virtuous and well-intentioned, can always live up to all the highest standards of the Corps. (Photo by LCpl Tyler Pender.)***

risiness of loving parents (or leaders) doing their best but occasionally failing to model the behavior they want their kids (or Marines) to emulate.

Several writers have recognized that this sort of hypocrisy is not just inevitable but perhaps even desirable. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson, for example, wrote in 2016:

In one sense, hypocrisy is unavoidable and necessary. If people were required, at all times, to live up to ideals of honesty, loyalty and compassion in order for those ideals to exist, there would be no ideals. Being a moral person is a struggle in which everyone repeatedly fails, becoming a hypocrite at each of those moments.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Harvard Law professor and author Jack Goldsmith has written that

[h]ypocrisy is an underappreciated political virtue. It can palliate self-interested and politically divisive government action through mollifying rhetoric and a call to shared values.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, commentator and journalist Ramesh Ponnuru sounded a similar note in 1996 when he wrote that

hypocrisy serves an important social function. If a public standard of moral conduct is to have any force at all, inevitably some people who believe in that standard will sometimes fail to meet it.

According to Ponnuru,

[f]or a society to be both decent and tolerable requires a healthy amount of hypocrisy. ... If a society doesn't want to see many of its members fall short of its moral standards, it can only have minimal or nonexistent standards.<sup>3</sup>

As these writers observed, good hypocrisy is inevitable, even in a decent and tolerable society made up of moral people. Similarly, good hypocrisy is inevitable even in good units led by the best Marines.

## What's the Right Amount of Hypocrisy?

Although hypocrisy may be an inevitable byproduct of good leadership, I am not arguing that Marines should *aspire* to be hypocrites. To the contrary, as Gerson noted, “[a] just and peaceful society depends on hypocrites who ultimately refuse to abandon the ideals they



**Good leaders can always look at themselves in the mirror and know they are at least striving to meet the standards they champion.** (Photo by LCpl Yasmin Perez.)

betray.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, strong units depend on leaders who refuse to abandon their ideals, even as they fall short of them again and again.

However, leaders can go too far in attempting to avoid hypocrisy. A singular focus on aligning what one says with what one believes or does can be crippling. In a misguided attempt to align the two, some leaders, out of a sense of guilt, may even go so far as to stop enforcing standards that they fall short of—they level down (ignore the failure

I would take the hypocrite who enforces standards over the Marine who fails to—but manages to avoid being a hypocrite—every time.) Any attempt to eliminate hypocrisy entirely is not only futile but also counterproductive.

So what to do? How can Marine leaders find the right balance between accepting that they will be hypocrites without either resigning themselves to that fate or trying too hard to prevent it? Put differently, what is the right amount of hypocrisy?

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***Good hypocrisy ... is the well-intentioned hypocrisy of loving parents (or leaders) doing their best but occasionally failing to model the behavior they want their kids (or Marines) to emulate.***

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of others) to avoid hypocrisy rather than level up (improve their own behavior). Think of the leader who fails to enforce body composition standards because he is carrying a few extra pounds himself. While this may have the virtuous effect of avoiding hypocrisy, it has the catastrophic effect of corroding standards of conduct. It is hard to tell which is worse. (Although it pains me to say it,

If they stopped and thought about it, the best Marine leaders would probably admit that they are indeed hypocrites. But they would also likely point out that the important question is not whether they are hypocrites but whether they are making reasonable attempts not to be. Good leaders can look themselves in the mirror because they know they are trying to meet the standards they



profess. At the same time, however, they are forgiving enough of themselves not to dwell on those occasions when they came up short, and they are confident enough not to be paralyzed by feelings of guilt when enforcing standards they have sometimes fallen short of.

Perhaps one reason this type of leader is so effective is that he tends to strike a similar balance when dealing with subordinates; he can be just as forgiving of his Marines as he is of himself.

### A Soft Spot for Good Hypocrites

It has been my experience that Marines respond well to this approach—I certainly do. This may be because Marines understand that their leaders will sometimes fall short but do not mind so long as their leaders are trying not to and it does not happen too often. I have also found that Marines appreciate leaders who set high expectations and pull no punches in enforcing them—even if, occasionally, such enforcement

is hypocritical. In fact, good hypocrisy of the kind exhibited by loving parents and caring leaders can even engender affection and loyalty; there is something noble and inspiring about people who continue to struggle even when they are bound to fail and who refuse to abandon the ideals they betray. Marines may also take a certain kind of comfort in knowing that, like them, their leaders are fallible.

### Conclusion

So maybe it is not true that there are few things worse, in the eyes of Marines, than hypocrisy. Rather, it may be the case that Marines intuitively grasp the difference between good hypocrisy—an inevitable byproduct of even the best kind of leadership—and bad hypocrisy. In that sense, hypocrisy may be one of the most misunderstood aspects of leadership. A fuller understanding and appreciation of hypocrisy and its various forms is therefore essential for

leaders—and followers—at every level in the Marine Corps. Marine leaders should recognize that hypocrisy is their fate without resigning themselves to it.

### Notes

1. Michael Gerson, "Trump's Hypocrisy Is Good for America," *Washington Post*, (November 2016), available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.
2. Jack Goldsmith, "Will Donald Trump Destroy the Presidency?" *The Atlantic*, (October 2017), available at <https://www.theatlantic.com>.
3. Ramesh Ponnuru, "In Defense of Hypocrisy," *Washington Examiner*, (September 1996), available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com>.
4. "Trump's Hypocrisy Is Good for America."



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