

The Principles of Bureaucratic Leadership

Formally recognizing the most uninspiring yet critically essential form of leadership

by Maj Leo Spaeder

The Marine Corps does not teach bureaucratic leadership; instead, it teaches personal leadership via the established lists of traits and principles. However, these are not interchangeable skills or ideas. The Corps does not teach this type of leadership because bureaucratic leadership sounds—and, frankly, is—lame. It does not connote the bold, warfighting spirit that the Service lionizes and values at the expense of other necessary styles of leadership. But if the Marines cannot afford to lose the first battle (and potentially, with it, the entire campaign) in the age of

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great power competition against peer competitors, then it must have an agile, responsive, and innovative supporting establishment capable of navigating the concept development, defense acquisition, and Capitol Hill landscapes to retain or regain our advantage over the enemy. This cannot be accomplished without savvy bureaucratic leadership. As the majority of general officers serve

at non-operational (aka bureaucratic) commands, we must arm our senior leaders with these skills. Even with their operational nature, there is still a need for bureaucratic leadership principles at and within the MEFs since those headquarters are the transition between personal and bureaucratic leadership spaces.

Below is a list of ten bureaucratic principles to describe how this leadership is different than the 11 Personal Leadership Principles currently taught by the Marine Corps.

1: Leading a Bureaucracy Is the Most Difficult Type of Leadership

With due respect to peer and combat leadership, bureaucratic leadership is the most difficult to master because Marines are least prepared for it by the typical career path. The scale is typically more vast, the mission is less clear, there are more peer-level leaders and co-workers in a bureaucratic landscape, and personal example and charisma only have limited effectiveness. First, the majority of assignments involve personal leadership, mostly at the platoon/company/battalion-level, and most Marines will never make it into a bureaucratic leadership position within their careers. Once in these fewer positions, there is a tendency to *do what got you there* since it has proven effective before, even though it is not the most effective strategy once you have arrived. Second, bureaucracies are usually sprawling organizations with a scale and scope much larger than the



To succeed as the future “Inside Force,” the Marine Corps must prepare leaders for the complex bureaucratic terrain of Washington, DC. (Photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Carlos Vazquez II.)

well-defined units within which most Marines operate. This proves challenging for the best Marines as the transition from personal to bureaucratic leadership is simultaneously combined with a larger span of responsibility. Third, this larger span of responsibility is often met with less clarity of purpose. Many bureaucracies have forward-looking responsibilities: develop the future force required to compete/deter/win in the future operating environment. That mission is wholly different from “seize MEF objective A.” Next, there are more peers in a bureaucracy. While there is always a clear chain of command in a bureaucracy, the power and authority that comes with rank is not as applicable. There is a different power dynamic between Marines and civilians/contractors than the typical Marine-only encounters in the fleet. Process bestows power, and multiple and different sources of power lead to more “peers.” Finally, personal charisma only projects so far and the span of the bureaucracy is often farther. If personal example is key to your leadership, how does that relate when many of your subordinates will never physically see you or hear your incredible motivation? This is why the Marine Corps needs to teach something more than well-cultivated charisma.

2: Many of Your Subordinates and Stakeholders Are Not on Your Team

This fact is unfortunate yet entirely true. Many of your subordinates have been at the organization longer than you, will be there longer than you, and therefore think they know better than you. The unity of effort experienced in combat where a unit divided is one about to be defeated does not translate into bureaucracies, where defense of rice bowls often reigns supreme. Internal resistance comes in many forms: slow-rolling initiatives, shaping conditions to limit options to those acceptable to the subordinate but not fully in-line with leadership, and mobilizing resistance through external communities of interest. External stakeholders also occupy a more important status in bureaucracies and your organization’s performance or expanding influence can be a direct threat to their mission. Understanding

this principle is essential for an effective bureaucratic leader.

3: Your Energy Powers the System

In bureaucracies, there are no fire and forget missions; you must always be engaged or your initiatives will wither on the vine. First, leaders of large organizations are often trying to overcome some cultural or structural deficiency that has led to sub-optimal results. In these cases, the direct and continued engagement of the leader is essential to overcome some of the hurdles outlined in principle #2 and improve outcomes. Secondly, external organizations—more on this in principle #9—will only engage with your action officers if they know that the organization’s leader is invested in this mission. If they know your action officers do not have your support (and your accompanying rank/authority) behind them, their influence will wane and effectiveness minimized. Bureaucracies cannot succeed with lethargic or disengaged leaders.

4: Own Your Calendar and Schedule It Purposefully

Everyone is busy, but leaders of bureaucracies are distressingly so. However, successful leaders must drive their calendars. Too often, calendars are filled with questionably valid engagements that do not contribute to the organization’s success. Worse, these poorly applicable engagements’ opportunity cost may actually undermine performance, since the leader is not thinking about or addressing the organization’s key challenges. When planning the schedule, leaders should ask two questions: Is this critical to the mission? If yes, then must I personally need to attend, or can an empowered subordinate go? This purposeful scheduling will open the calendar for important events and create time to attend battle-rhythm events (as a chair or just an observer to assess the “pulse” of the room), interact with your team on key challenges or just build rapport, and, most importantly, think. Every leader—bureaucratic or not—should also schedule a weekly Shultz hour: a time to close the door, move beyond the close-fight bedlam, and reflect on longer-term goals and

the organization’s general direction.¹ Critical thinking is essential to success (more on this next in principle #5) but requires time, and a packed calendar is a prominent roadblock that leaders must remove.

5: Process Does Not and Will Not Replace Leadership or Critical Thinking

Effective bureaucracies need established processes to function, but process cannot exist simply for process’ sake nor to replace decision making, yet this occurs far too often. The same organization that instills the idea that an 80 percent solution executed violently now rather than a 100 percent solution executed later is still debating a unisex dress uniform after almost a decade of consideration.

There are certainly arguments supporting group genius and process, but process must be linked to the effect of the decision and the appropriate decisionmaker. Also, leaders must recognize people’s unconscious bias to conform within groups; often, processes that should indicate rigorous critical thinking merely serve as a rubber-stamp for previous work without challenging underlying—and often invalid—assumptions. Leaders must generate time (from principle #4) and think critically about both the process and the recommendations it has generated.

6: You Must Be Able to Connect With Subordinates Without Physical Presence or Personal Charisma

Bureaucracies are normally large, spread across multiple locations if not multiple states, and have competing events and battle rhythms; there are limited opportunities for an all-hands formation. Receiving instruction directly from a leader is not a feasible long-term strategy in a fast-paced military bureaucracy. Leaders must transition from traits of personal leadership and develop communications means that can overcome the inherent distributed nature of bureaucracies as well as the insidious challenges related under principle #2.

Then-acting Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Modly, demonstrated a fantastic example with his SECNAV

Vectors. These weekly messages were direct, personally written communications to the large and disparate Department of the Navy bureaucracy about cutting edge topics affecting the Naval Service. These concise one-to-two-page letters informed the entire workforce about his priorities and commander's intent directly, avoiding potential distortions or outright stonewalling of the message. However, the former secretary provides a welcome reminder that bureaucratic leadership principles are a supplement to, not a replacement for, the essential character traits and leadership principles.

7: Know Your (and Your Principal's) Reference Point and Risk Tolerance

This principle is firmly derived in prospect theory and absolutely essential for every organizational leader and staff officer to know. Everyone has a reference point—a hallmark event that defines your worldview—and an accompany risk tolerance, either risk-adverse (the default setting for military officers who are conservative by nature according to Samuel Huntington) or risk-seeking. For example, after the disastrous 1806 war with Napoleon in which the decisive Battle of Jena-Auerstadt was fought, Prussian King Frederick William III's reference point was imprinted to that humiliating defeat. The famed Gerhard von Scharnhorst—arguably the ultimate bureaucratic leader—exploited this reference point to introduce wholesale reform to the Prussian military system. When the king wavered on implementing needed reform, Scharnhorst used his reference point to highlight the cost of maintaining the status quo and reinforcing the king's risk-seeking tolerance in order to regain his lost kingdom and personal honor.

Most leaders of large organizations are risk-averse, while subordinates are risk-seeking. Many Marines—certainly myself—are guilty of providing at least one “blow it all up” recommendation to a senior because they would not be the one accountable for its effects. Using the current Commandant as an example, his force design initiative is certainly risk-seeking as it has upended the previous Service strategy

and capstone operating concept. Why is he risk-seeking? Maybe his reference point is his tour as the Marine Forces Pacific commander, where many have postulated a Jena-Auerstadt moment for the United States. Knowing reference points and risk tolerance, you can identify your own, know how you may be sold on ideas (different tolerances require different strategies), and how you can convince your senior to adopt a course of action.

8: Set Priorities, Advertise Them Thoroughly, and Resource Them Accordingly

Tropes such as, “If everything is your number one priority, then nothing is your number one priority,” and “If you don't set priorities, someone else will,” are well-understood yet consistently violated in large organizations. Ever-changing number one priorities waste resources and prevent the organization from achieving its goals, yet leaders consistently violate these principles. As an aspiring bureaucratic leader, deliberately consider what you want your organization to accomplish over different time horizons. Understand the threats that may undermine these goals (which could include a higher headquarters not following this principle) and the opportunities that may reinforce them. Make long-term priorities more durable to changes, while short-term priorities are more concrete. Outline these priorities in accessible forms. Lastly, resource them accordingly and then follow the plan. Deliberation, dissemination, and discipline are required to fulfill this principle.

9: Peer Leadership Is Managing Adjacent Organizations Who Have the Same Problems Listed Above

Hopefully, the appreciation that bureaucracies are not unitary beings moving in lockstep has taken hold. Since adjacent organizations are peers of fellow bureaucracies, an effective leader must adeptly manage the effects of these peers, which themselves have subordinates operating not in line with their leader's intent, lethargic leaders unable to connect to their workforce across a large span of control, and are constantly

changing priorities while also under-resourcing them. This description of a complex environment is another key difference between the burdens of bureaucratic versus personal leadership.

10: Leading a Bureaucracy Is Thankless

As a bureaucratic leader, do not expect Marines to read your Legion of Merit citation and laud your accomplishments long after you have hung up your uniform. While this type of leadership is essential to any successful military organization and campaign, it is thankless by nature. Again referring to Scharnhorst, he never received personal command or accolades that he deserved in his lifetime, despite creating the Prussian system that dominated the continent for the next century. Bureaucratic leaders must internalize President John F. Kennedy's quote that “victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan.” To be successful, bureaucratic leaders must recognize and accept that they will not be recognized for positive achievement, more likely being the target of scorn. Only then can you fight with a happy heart and achieve your organization's goals.

Through its approach to personnel development, the Marine Corps has been wildly successful in developing personal leadership in its Marines. This is why outside organizations regularly study the Marine Corps and attempt to adapt its principles and traits. However, the Marines have not accepted the idea of bureaucratic leadership as uniquely different than personal leadership, requiring a different set of principles for application. Hopefully, the list of ten principles above can serve as a foundation for recognizing this need and fill some of this vacuum. While bureaucratic leadership is not exciting, it is essential for the continued success of the Marine Corps in the future.

Note

1. The Shultz Hour refers to Secretary of State and former Marine George Shultz who advocated this scheduling approach to students at Marine Corps University.

