



# Leadership Traits of United States Marines – Understanding and Developing Your Own “Gung Ho” Leadership Style

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## Executive Summary

*Effective leadership involves the study and consideration of what it will take to move a particular group of people to accomplish a specific goal. While the qualities necessary to do these things with people are necessarily within all of us, leadership is not about polishing a resume or climbing the corporate ladder. Leadership is about the relationship between the leader and those being led and how to make that connection produce results on whatever field it is that you play or fight. Leadership traits taught to and instilled in the Marines can provide tools to legal practitioners to develop or hone their own effective and winning leadership style.*



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## Forward

This discussion is a study in leadership. Keep in mind at the outset that leadership is not solely about the individual. The phrase “Gung Ho,” which is now associated with the Marine Corps as a whole, and which roughly translates to a zealous and enthusiastic attitude, is actually derived from the Chinese industrial cooperative concept of “Work Together - Work in Harmony.” A Marine officer leading the 2nd Marine Raider Battalion during World War II learned about that concept and imparted it to his Marines so successfully that it was eventually adopted by the Marine Corps. Effective leadership involves the study and consideration of what it will take to move a particular group of people to accomplish a specific goal. While the qualities necessary to do these things with people are necessarily within you, leadership is not about polishing a resume or climbing the corporate ladder. It is about the relationship between the leader and those being led and how to make that connection produce results on whatever field it is that you play or fight.

On I-95, forty-five minutes south of Washington, DC, lies the expansive Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Virginia. In the summer, situated on a broad lowland swath of the Potomac River, Quantico's parade decks and sandy trails serve as a steamy setting for the Marine Corps' Officer Candidate School (“OCS”). Returning to Quantico for a change of command ceremony about ten years ago, my family and I ran into a platoon of candidates on the street - drenched in sweat, eyes wide with fear and stress, rushing to get from one training evolution to another. In the late 1980s, I had once been one of those candidates, serving six weeks at the “school” between my junior and senior years in college. In truth, OCS was more of a vetting process than an education. It consisted of six weeks of intense training and physical activity designed to push the limits of what stress people can endure, short of actually being placed in combat. The Marines wanted to ensure back then that whoever was leading its enlisted men and women were not wilting flowers and would be able to endure and function under the stress of combat. Many candidates did not make it through.

Throughout that process, woven in between forced marches and obstacle courses, was an intense course in small unit leadership. Those future officers were exposed both to the textbook concepts surrounding a study of leadership and the field techniques the Marine Corps had developed for executing missions. It was the latter which provided the context in which all those theoretical lessons in leadership would be put to the test. Candidates and other young Marines are taught what “metrics” or “facts” to analyze during the planning phase of an operation, what steps to go through in that planning phase, and how to issue an order in a succinct and organized manner (for Marines, the famous five paragraph order).

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A few years removed from OCS after college, and after another six-month stint at Quantico for officers known as The Basic School, I found myself in a tent in Silopi, Turkey with the officers of Golf Company, Second Battalion, Eighth Marine Regiment. The company commander was Captain Christopher Mulholland, a veteran of Beirut. The evening before our battalion would make an assault across the Tigris River into Northern Iraq against an entrenched enemy, we met in a tent to plan the next day's assault. We progressed through the now familiar planning process as if it were any other exercise. Knotty issues (such as the newly changed rules of engagement that prohibited us from firing on the enemy until fired upon) were addressed and dealt with. Timelines were adjusted in the field in Iraq when what looked like hills on the map turned out to be small mountains on the ground (the fast-paced ascent we envisioned became a two-day climb in the face of the enemy). In the end, the Marine Corps leadership system worked, both in our 200-man company and across the entire battlefield. In our sector, the enemy "beat feet" without ever firing a shot when we were within shooting distance and the mission was accomplished without the loss of American life.

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Just as we typically dedicate a portion of our time to developing business, a segment of our professional life should be dedicated to improving our base of knowledge related to our profession.

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### Marine Corps Leadership Traits

The Marine Corps has codified those intangible elements of character and disposition, which it calls the "Leadership Traits." There is, of course, a military acronym designed to help Marines learn these traits: JJDIDTIEBUCKLE. That stands for the following: Justice, Judgment, Dependability, Initiative,

Decisiveness, Tact, Integrity, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty and Enthusiasm. Each will be addressed separately here, first by summarizing what each trait means to Marines, and then by discussing how these may apply in other contexts.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. Justice.

Because Marines often work in hostile environments and hectic conditions, it is all that more important for them to be able to rely upon a settled sense of order. It is imperative for unit harmony and cohesion that there not be seething personal disputes or disgruntled subordinates within the group. It is therefore critical that punishments, rewards, opportunities and assignments be distributed fairly, impartially, and consistently.

There is really no extrapolation required to see the application of this concept to your business or practice. Properly motivated subordinates are typically willing to work hard and get the job done, but they want to know that their efforts will be rewarded, that there is no favoritism at work in the organization, and that the goalposts are not constantly being moved. People respond well when they know they are being treated fairly and getting a fair shake. Even when they have erred in some fashion, they should be reprimanded through constructive counseling, which applies even standards to the conduct at issue. Further, all those engaging in the prohibited or erroneous conduct need to receive the same treatment. The counseling process, properly handled, can itself be a rewarding and performance-enhancing exercise. Finally, never underestimate the power of recognition and rewards for jobs well done. Napoleon developed the modern practice of awarding medals for conspicuous conduct and he felt that he could move mountains with "a bit of colored ribbon."<sup>2</sup>

#### 2. Judgment.

Judgment is one's ability to think about things clearly, calmly, and in an orderly fashion. Judgment can be improved by avoiding knee-jerk reactions, acting impulsively, or making rash decisions. Marines counsel approaching problems with a common-sense attitude and

generally follow some reasoned thought process to arrive at a well-considered decision. Remember that in the context of war-fighting, Marines must remain cognizant of the mission at all times, and all other considerations must be subordinated to accomplishing that mission.

In the civilian context we can again see the direct applicability of these concepts. When acting as leaders, we must maintain an even-keeled approach to problems. Even in emotionally charged situations, leaders do not have the luxury of venting or lashing out. There are larger issues at stake than a leader's personal feelings, and they need to be able to separate their egos from the greater good of the team. When it is time to analyze a situation and choose a course of action, leaders must ensure that they do so in a pragmatic, principled and reasoned way. Exercising judgment also involves exercising one's power in an even-handed manner – channeling your inner Solomon. If there is going to be a weekend "working trip" to the Hamptons, then everyone should be invited. If it is wrong for one person to expense a limousine on a business trip, then that should be verboten for all. If Jane is going to get rewarded for staying late, then so should Jack.

#### 3. Dependability.

Dependability simply means that you can be counted on to get the job done. A Marine leader makes solutions, not excuses. Marine leaders are where they need to be, when they need to be there, and they have their "stuff" together. Dependability also involves carrying out lawful orders and accomplishing the mission, even if you do not agree with it. Marines work within the system to effect change if they feel an approach is wrong or misguided, but once a decision is made they are all in for the win and will execute their duties with the highest standards of performance.

Are there things that we can do as civilian leaders to improve our own dependability? There should be. Consider whether there are systems in place in your life to ensure that you are at work on time, or even the first at work. Can you be

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counted on to chip in or provide support when people need to stay late, or are you one of those superiors who walk out and expect the troops to have the work done in the morning? Do you complain and sulk if your proposal was disregarded in favor of someone else's? Can you be expected to make every effort to carry out initiatives which you may not necessarily agree with? Are you the type of leader who accepts, or even seeks out, unpleasant work because getting it done is the right thing to do for the organization? If you answered "no" to any of these questions, and it would be hard not to, there may be room for personal improvement on this front.

### 4. Initiative.

Initiative involves doing what needs to be done without being told to do it. It also encompasses improvising and acting resourcefully in situations where your normal tools or methods are unavailable to you. Marines are taught to expect the unexpected, and when it arrives, Marines do not cower in the corner – they take on the unforeseen challenge and deliver solutions. Every Marine is taught to be a leader. Remember that wherever there are two Marines, one of them is in charge. There are going to be times when officers or non-commissioned officers are down or unavailable, but decisions still need to be made. Marines understand that it is their duty when that occurs to step up and undertake what needs to be done to accomplish the mission.

Taking the initiative in our civilian careers sets us apart from our peers. How often do we hear the disappointing mantra that a particular task is not in someone's job description? Leaders don't care about job descriptions or CYA, they get things done. When we start thinking about ourselves as "fixers" and people that make things happen, we are starting to think like leaders. People will take notice. Leadership, however, is exercised as much in the dark as in the light of day.

Leaders are those who find solutions to problems. They do not just shoot down other people's ideas; they adapt and overcome whatever obstacles they see in the path to meeting their objective. When

you get out there and demonstrate that you are motivated and ready to get the job done, torpedoes be damned, then you are coming into your own as a leader.

### 5. Decisiveness.

The worst decision is indecision. Here is what the Non-Commissioned Officer Handbook tells young Marine leaders about this concept: "Make sound and timely decisions. To make a sound decision, you should know the mission, what you are capable of doing to accomplish it, what means you have to accomplish it, and what possible impediments or obstacles exist (in combat these would be enemy capabilities) that might stand in the way. Timeliness is as important as soundness. In many military situations, a timely, though inferior, decision is better than a long-delayed, theoretically correct, decision."<sup>3</sup>

As I personally learned many times as a young Officer Candidate, and later as a Second Lieutenant in the forests of Quantico, Marine leaders must avoid what is known as "analysis paralysis." Marines now speak in terms of a "70% Solution" which means that once about 70% of the possible analysis of a situation is completed, a Marine leader should feel sufficiently confident to develop and execute a plan of action. This message was driven home on many occasions in Quantico by Marine instructors in my face asking "What are you going to do, Lieutenant? Time is ticking – you have to make a decision." At the end of the day, Marines rightly believe that a good decision executed soon is 100% better than a perfect decision executed later.

We live in a new digital age. Many of our processes and systems allow for accelerated decision making. We, and our competitors and adversaries, have the ability to access and assemble information at speeds that were never possible before. We now have access to infinite knowledge in our cell phones. As a result, decision making tempo becomes an even more important weapon in your business or practice. The truth about any conflict scenario is that even the best laid plans typically do not survive the first contact with the enemy or adversary. There is

always going to be a need to adapt, improvise and overcome difficulties in the course of executing a plan. In light of that, the 70% Solution approach makes as much sense in the civilian world as it does in the military context. Modern leaders will do well to quickly assemble all reasonably obtainable information, process and analyze that information, and then engage the decision making steps touched on above to quickly enact a good and timely plan. That approach will typically generate more productive results than waiting until an exhaustive review of all options is undertaken.

### 6. Tact.

Marines are taught that when leading, sometimes how they say things is as important as what they say. They must consider the context and the audience, and then attempt to communicate in a manner that should not offend reasonable people. Marines believe in being firm but also polite and courteous. Avoiding angering team members is conducive to accomplishing the mission, and the golden rule of treating others as a Marine would want to be treated is good to remember.

Whatever the common goal is that we want to achieve in the civilian world, it is infinitely easier to accomplish with a relatively happy and harmonious team than it is with a group of individuals harboring resentments or hurt feelings. Hyperbole, hysterics, foul language and shouting should be avoided at all costs. Outside the context of an emergent situation, it is difficult to conceive of something that needs to be said that cannot be communicated in a calm and professional manner.

### 7. Integrity.

There is nothing more important to earning the trust of Marines than acting with integrity. Marines often say that it is the cornerstone of leadership. It means being honest and truthful at all times, even when no one is watching. Integrity equates to a Marine's honor, and irrespective of what else is taken away from a Marine – her treasure, her freedom, even her life – she alone controls whether her integrity remains intact.

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It is not always easy to do the right thing, especially when no one else is watching. There is cash register honesty, and then there is honesty at tax time, and we have to strive to be honest in both. One's integrity shines through and is visible to those we lead. It is also important to maintain for our own self-worth. The short version of the Lawyer's Prayer of St. Thomas More comes to mind: "Lord, let me be able in argument, accurate in analysis, correct in conclusion, candid with my clients and honest with my adversaries. Stand beside me in court so that I will not, in order to win a point, lose my soul."

### 8. Endurance.

Digging deep for the will to carry on in the face of hardship is expected of Marines. It involves the physical and mental stamina needed to withstand pain, fatigue and stress. Marine leaders do not just find that in themselves, they find it in others. Marine leaders are able to convince those Marines with them experiencing the same hardships that they too have what it takes to survive and win. Marines lead by example.

Living this concept involves being able to deal with and thrive under difficult and stressful conditions. When it is time to stay overnight to meet a deadline, true leaders will roll up their sleeves, call the sitter, and show the way it is going to get done. Setting the example in such situations, whether it is putting in the long hours or making the dreaded cross-country sales call, is what the leader should be doing. You must also believe that you can achieve more than what you think is possible. When you believe you can achieve the unexpected, others will believe it, too. As they say in the Corps, when talking about enduring hardships in the course of getting the job done, it is mind over matter: "if you don't mind, it don't matter."

### 9. Bearing.

Bearing involves the way Marines conduct and carry themselves. From the day they earn the title "Marine," they are expected to act in line with the highest soldierly and ethical conduct. Their manner should reflect confidence, competence and control.

There is value in our civilian lives to maintaining a soldierly bearing. We always want to maintain self-control and instill confidence in our subordinates. Do "Chicken Littles" who cry that the sky is falling whenever they encounter difficulties instill confidence in others? That kind of defeatist attitude does not demonstrate leadership and does not help accomplish the common goal. Especially in tough times, successful leaders remain calm and maintain a stiff upper lip. Subordinates look to their leaders in stressful situations, and they are more likely to follow directions and perform well when their team leader is calmly working the problem and exuding a sense of confidence.

### 10. Unselfishness.

Joining the Marine Corps is itself a selfless act. But beyond that, Marines are committed to a "team first" mentality. Marine leaders look out for the welfare of their Marines before looking to their own. They avoid making themselves comfortable at the expense of others. At all times, Marine leaders advance the interests of the mission and their team before any personal considerations. A common demonstration of this mentality is that the lowest-ranking Marines eat first and the highest-ranking officers or non-commissioned officers present eat last.

In our professions, we exhibit leadership when we avoid using our positions or titles for personal gain at the expense of others. While we will not often experience a chow line and have the opportunity to eat last, there are certainly other opportunities to put the interests of our subordinates above our own. Ensure your team members have the same tools and resources that you have access to. Give credit to your team members and the team as a whole when credit is due. In short, think less about elevating yourself and more about elevating others.

### 11. Courage.

Courage can be defined many ways. People sometimes equate courage with being fearless. In reality, true courage is not the absence of fear. Rather, courage is being cognizant of both one's duty

and one's natural fear (of death or injury in combat as examples), and despite that fear and apprehension, doing one's duty in spite of it.

Examples of courage in our workplace is abundant. It can be standing up to a superior when they are wrong or eschewing the easy road in favor of a more challenging ethical or problematic course. Moral courage can mean doing the right thing or standing up for what is right, even though you know it is going to negatively affect you. Pushing through our fears and doing our duty demonstrates courage in the workplace. Having the intestinal fortitude to practice our craft (whatever that may be) in a principled and ethical manner, despite temptations to do otherwise, exhibits courage. Taking on new or difficult challenges despite the fear of failure is another example. Always standing up for what is right and good, and doing what is hard because the "hard" is what makes things great, is the personification of courage.

### 12. Knowledge.

The Marine Corps expects its leaders to be knowledgeable about their warfighting craft. Infantry platoon leaders, for example, are expected to know how to effectively operate each weapon system in their platoon. They are also expected to have a working knowledge of skills typically performed by others, such as having the ability to call in artillery or air support. More deeply, Marine officers are also expected to have a foundational knowledge of the principles of war and modern tactics – knowledge that should indirectly guide and color their decision making, even subconsciously in stressful and high-intensity environments. Marines are also expected to continue their military education at every level. There are numerous courses and written workshops for every level of Marine leader, and various schools are found within the Marine Corps University at Quantico. For officers, these include the Marine Corps War College, the School of Advanced War Fighting, and the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. The Marine Corps takes the continuing education of its leaders very seriously

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and provides them every opportunity to further develop their base of knowledge.

In our civilian positions, we should also strive to become supremely knowledgeable about our particular craft. Just as we typically dedicate a portion of our time to developing business, a segment of our professional life should be dedicated to improving our base of knowledge related to our profession. Leaders are constantly reading literature applicable to their industry. Yet, reading should not be limited to traditional trade publications. There are endless fields of study which, while not directly related to our particular profession, can provide new insight and differing perspectives on how to approach our day-to-day business. Our subordinates deserve leaders with that kind of intellectual curiosity. They also appreciate that their superior is a thoughtful leader and is seeking to provide new and creative ways to improve performance or solve problems. So be prepared by knowing what you are expected to know, and learning what you are not expected to know. Let all that knowledge wash over your decision making and do not be afraid to reference the source of your inspiration where appropriate. Finally, encourage your people to develop their own base of knowledge through suggested reading lists or by making seminars or other educational opportunities available to them.

### 13. Loyalty.

The Marine Corps Motto, *Semper Fidelis* – Always Faithful – is the embodiment of this principle for Marines. First and foremost, Marines are dedicated to each other. When they fight, they fight side by side and are committed to accomplishing their mission without compromising their devotion to each other's welfare. It is also very much engrained in each Marine that he is not to leave another Marine behind on the battlefield, and the knowledge that he or she will not be left behind is a powerful motivator when they are asked to place themselves in harm's way. Their loyalty also runs up and down the chain of command. Marines endeavor to

be loyal to their subordinates, peers and commanders as well. Sometimes, one's loyalties require prioritization. Before I had a family, this Marine's priorities were God, Corps, Country (in that order).

How do we express and demonstrate loyalty in our profession? One way is to never publicly criticize our organization or management, or to discuss our internal problems with outsiders. Even when we disagree with decisions, we carry those out to the fullest of our ability as if we had made them ourselves. We work the system to effect change from the inside. Civilian leaders also recognize the accomplishments of their subordinates and share success. They also willingly shoulder responsibility for failure, and accept responsibility for poor performance by the group. Effective leaders avoid throwing their subordinates under the bus and they do not take sole credit for team performance. Ultimately, loyalty and many of the other leadership traits go hand in hand. Are we part of something bigger than ourselves and are we committed to achieving a good greater than personal gain or advancement? How we demonstrate that loyalty goes a long way in defining for our team members how competent of a leader we are.

### 14. Enthusiasm.

Marines understand that enthusiasm is contagious. Demonstrating an honest interest and belief in one's mission helps motivate others to accomplish that same mission. Marines believe that any task assigned to them is worth doing right and with *esprit de corps*. By understanding their mission, and coming to believe in its accomplishment, Marine leaders transfer that belief into their teams, thereby making accomplishment of the mission more likely.

Our professional duties can sometimes be unpleasant and tiresome. But understanding why they need to be done, and communicating that understanding, helps our civilian teams understand their goals and make their achievement more possible. Nobody likes a "Debbie

Downer," and those kinds of people do not motivate others. Leaders do what they need to do to pump themselves up about their obligations so they can pass that excitement and desire to succeed along to their teams. Working together, embracing hardships and overcoming obstacles all create a gung-ho mentality and not only help accomplish your goal, but foster unit morale and cohesion.

## CONCLUSION

Having explored the Marine Corps Leadership Traits and their applicability to our civilian professions, where do we go from here? The reality is that leadership is difficult to define, and it means different things to different people. An apt definition is that leadership is the art of focusing the efforts and talents of a group of people toward the achievement of a common goal. Note that I define "leadership" as an art and not a science. There is no precise formula for leading people effectively, and what it means to lead cannot be fully captured by pen and paper. Leadership qualities cannot be artificially instilled in others. Nevertheless, everyone has innate qualities and characteristics that can be molded into an individually suited leadership style. So while leadership cannot be given, it can be taught, nurtured and developed.

### Endnotes

- 1 Sources generally relied upon but not necessarily quoted herein include the USMC Leadership Handbook ("NCO Handbook") available at [www.6mcd.usmc.mil/ftl\\_site/Handbook/marine\\_corps\\_leadership\\_traits.htm](http://www.6mcd.usmc.mil/ftl_site/Handbook/marine_corps_leadership_traits.htm); *Leading Marines*, MCWP 6-11 (formerly FMFM 1-0) available at <http://www.marines.mil/Portals/59/Publications/MCWP%206-11%20Leading%20Marine.pdf>; *Marine Leadership Traits from Marines.com*, available at [www.marines.com/being-a-marine/leadership](http://www.marines.com/being-a-marine/leadership), and Cpl. Beddoe, 07/19/13 Texas DevilDog, "Backbone" USMC Leadership Traits – JJDITIEBUCKLE, available at [www.txdevildog.com/backbone-usmc-leadership-traits-jjditiebuckle/](http://www.txdevildog.com/backbone-usmc-leadership-traits-jjditiebuckle/).
- 2 Full quote: "A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon."
- 3 NCO Handbook, *supra* at n 1.