

THE MARINE CORPS LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES – MUSTERING YOUR INNER
TALENT TO LEAD IN TODAY’S WORKPLACE

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A. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is intangible, hard to measure, and difficult to describe. Its quality would seem to stem from many factors. But certainly they must include a measure of inherent ability to control and direct, self-confidence based on expert knowledge, initiative, loyalty, pride and sense of responsibility. Inherent ability cannot be instilled, but that which is latent or dormant can be developed. Other ingredients can be acquired. They are not easily learned. But leaders can be and are made.

General C. B. Cates, 19th Commandant of the Marine Corps¹

Just as Marines engage in programs of education and training to foster their innate leadership talents, we too can embark on a journey of self-discovery and development to improve our performance as leaders in our professional lives. The Marine Corps' Leadership Principles, employed in conjunction with the Leadership Traits (which are the subject of a separate discussion), are guides to progress in this area. Marines do their best to live these principles when leading other Marines and sailors, and these same principles can be applied to our positions in business, law, medicine and any other civilian endeavor which provides us the opportunity to exercise command and supervision over a group of individuals. Our discussion here will describe the eleven principles, consider how they are utilized and understood by Marines, and suggest potential applications of those to our professional lives.

B. THE USMC LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

1. *Know Yourself and Seek Self Improvement*

¹ Quoted in Official USMC Pub. RP 0103, *Principles of Marine Corps Leadership*, hereafter ("RP 0103"). This work has also been influenced by the discussion of the application of 11 principles to Marine officers on Marines.com. www.marines.com/being-a-marine/leadership-principles.

The Marine Corps instructs that this principle can be exercised through constant self-evaluation with reference to the leadership traits. Essentially, Marines try to develop a realistic and candid understanding of their own character and tendencies, and seek to improve any shortcomings.

Marines suggest the following specific methods of self-improvement:

- *Make an honest evaluation of yourself to determine your strong and weak personal qualities*
- *Seek the honest opinions of your friends or superiors*
- *Learn by studying the causes for the success and failures of others*
- *Develop a genuine interest in people*
- *Master the art of effective writing and speech*
- *Have a definite plan to achieve your goal [RP 0103 at § 3].*

We can see that this program of self-improvement is not limited to the military context. The very exercise of evaluating one's own leadership qualities is likely to produce immediate benefits. In fact, this one principle can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger program of development in this area that is the subject of our treatment here. In short, we should endeavor to make a searching, brave and honest assessment of ourselves and then commit ourselves to a campaign of education and improvement where there are areas of need.

2. *Be Technically and Tactically Proficient*

The bottom line here is that in order to lead you must be able to "do." Marines respect those leaders who demonstrate a high degree of proficiency in their particular Military Occupation Specialty ("MOS"). So an artillery officer needs to be capable of doing all those things the Marines under him in the gun battery are expected to do including: safely transport powder and ammunition, lay the guns, set fuses on shells, calculate the fire direction data, place elevation and deflection (direction) on the guns, and fire the weapons. Similarly, infantry platoon leaders are expected to be proficient in the use of all of the small arms used in their platoon and in the company as a whole. They know how to breakdown, clean and operate not only their own

pistol or rifle, but each squad automatic weapon and crew served machinegun used in the company. Marine officers must also be physically fit, capable of using communication and encryption devices, and competent with logistics, tactics, and a myriad of other skills that are employed in the course of undertaking a mission.

Here is what the Marine Corps suggests for improvement in this area:

- *Know what is expected of you then expend time and energy on becoming proficient at those things*
- *Form an attitude early on of seeking to learn more than is necessary*
- *Observe and study the actions of capable leaders*
- *Spend time with those people who are recognized as technically and tactically proficient at those things*
- *Prepare yourself for the job of the leader at the next higher rank*
- *Seek feedback from superiors, peers and subordinates [RP 0103 at § 3].*

Again, these suggestions are directly applicable to our professional lives. We should be committed to continuing education, even when it is not “required” by our employer or licensing bodies. If our staff all had the flu and didn’t make it in to work, could we perform every action that is necessary to make a filing or generate a presentation on short notice? When was the last time we sought feedback from our subordinates, peers and superiors? To live this principle we may have to spend some time getting down in the trenches and learning what all of our team members are doing and how to do those things properly. That process will itself garner respect from subordinates and provide team leaders with additional insight when planning and making decisions.

3. *Know Your People and Look Out for their Welfare*

Not all Marines perform the same way under stress. Nor are all Marines blessed with the same physical or mental gifts. A good squad leader, for example, knows which Marines have the most endurance, which can be trusted to communicate a message accurately, which are strong enough to be assigned a machine gun, and which are best at land navigation. When assigning responsibilities on a patrol or in an attack, he or she knows who is best suited for the tasks at hand and how to best distribute the workload to ensure the mission is accomplished in a timely manner.

In addition, there is a second component to this principle. It almost goes without saying that next to accomplishment of the mission, the welfare of his or her people is a Marine leader's highest priority. Looking again to our sample squad leader, he is going to make sure that his Marines have operable weapons and tools, that they are well supplied with ammunition, food and water, and that they have time to eat, sleep and attend to any medical issues. It's not just about a performance review at the end of the year – a Marine leader ensures that her Marines are cared for and protected, and those Marines appreciate knowing that their superior has their back. On the chow line, Marine leaders eat last after their Marines have been fed.

The Marines remind us that practicing this principle involves the following:

- *Put your Marines' welfare before you own*
- *Be approachable*
- *Encourage individual development*
- *Know your unit's mental attitude; keep in touch with their thoughts*
- *Ensure fair and equal distribution of rewards*
- *Provide sufficient recreational time and insist on participation [RP 0103 at § 3].*

So too in our civilian roles can we be astutely aware of the unique gifts and shortcomings of our team members. As on a football team, not every team member has the speed and agility to run the ball. But they may be well suited to block on the line, play safety or kick the ball. Knowing our team members helps us accomplish our goals and also avoids frustrating team members by assigning them tasks for which they are ill suited. By the same token, looking out for their welfare may mean providing them with the training and counseling they need to improve their performance in certain areas. We need to ensure our team has the tools it needs to get the job done, and that they are rewarded (as a team and as individuals) when they have performed well. As leaders we must also be the champion of our team members – doing our best to advocate for their compensation and advancement, pushing back when they are unfairly blamed or attacked, and generally taking the heat for poor team performance and dealing with the repercussions of that internally among your own team. Finally, we must avoid benefiting ourselves at the expense of our team. True leaders share success amongst their team, but as to those outside the team, bear the burden of failure alone.

4. *Keep Your Personnel Informed*

The Marine Corps believes that well-informed Marines perform better. Keeping them informed is related to their morale and efficiency. When Marines are kept in the loop they feel more invested in the team effort and less like a pawn in someone else's game. Marines with knowledge of a commander's intent can also take initiative and work towards accomplishment of the mission even in the absence of direct supervision by that leader.

The Marines suggest the following techniques when acting on this principle:

- *Whenever possible, explain why tasks must be done and the plan to accomplish a task*
- *Be alert to detect the spread of rumors. Stop rumors by replacing them with the truth*
- *Build morale and esprit de corps by publicizing information concerning successes of your unit*
- *Keep your unit informed about current legislation and regulations affecting their pay, promotion, privileges, and other benefits [RP 0103 at § 3].*

The two concepts that stand out when applying these techniques to our professions are 1) the importance for subordinates in understanding the leader's intent and mission; and 2) the relationship between knowledge of the surrounding circumstances and a team's cohesiveness, morale and initiative. Knowing where a leader is going and what is being attempted allows for subordinates to fill in the gaps when direct supervision is not present. They should be encouraged to show such initiative, even if attempts to do so fall short or miss the mark. Secondly, enthusiasm and buy-in are more likely among team members when they understand the problem and feel like they are contributing to its resolution. Sharing that success among team members and encouraging independent thinking also go a long way in building comradery and unit morale.

5. *Set the Example*

Marines place a great deal of emphasis on the professional competence, integrity and attitude of their leaders. Marines and sailors in a unit reflect the image set by their leadership. Marine leaders are expected to personally demonstrate courage, skill and aptitude for the job at hand, physical fitness and military bearing of the highest order.

The Marine Corps mentions consideration of the following factors when applying this principle:

- *Show your subordinates that you are willing to do the same things you ask them to do*

- *Maintain an optimistic outlook*
- *Conduct yourself so that your personal habits are not open to criticism*
- *Avoid showing favoritism to any subordinate*
- *Delegate authority and avoid over supervision, in order to develop leadership among subordinates [RP 0103 at § 3].*

We can probably all recall at least one mentor or similar figure in our professional lives who set the bar high and met our early expectations of what a successful leader was. That person likely had their act together, looked the part, brought home the wins and shared some spotlight with us. As we mature in our professional lives it is our duty to ascend to that role. When we suit up in the morning, we should endeavor to have a day where we look sharp, exude confidence, act professionally and avoid pettiness. To a certain extent we must elevate our thinking and our game if we expect others to follow us into the trenches of our profession. We can think our way into setting the example. That often involves taking a moment before acting or reacting, and thinking about appearances and how our words or actions will reflect upon us and those in our team. Again, if we expect others to follow us we must exhibit a concern for the team over the individual and we have to live the part.

6. *Ensure that the Task is Understood, Supervised and Accomplished*

Supervision is the most important step in executing a plan and accomplishing a mission. Accordingly, mastering this principle will have the most direct impact on the degree to which Marine leaders harness their human resources to accomplish their missions.

Give thought to the following when practicing this principle:

- *Issue every order as if it were your own*
- *Use the established chain of command*

- *Encourage subordinates to ask questions concerning any point in your orders or directives they do not understand*
- *Question subordinates to determine if there is any doubt or misunderstanding in regard to the task to be accomplished*
- *Supervise the execution of your orders*
- *Exercise care and thought in supervision; over supervision will hurt initiative and create resentment, while under supervision will not get the job done [RP 0103 at § 3].*

Before they can perform, subordinates need to understand what it is they are expected to do. A leader must effectively communicate his or her instructions by means which are clear, concise and not easily misunderstood. Having given succinct and easily understood instructions, leaders must then supervise the performance of those tasks by their subordinates. That does not mean that tasks should be done for their subordinates or micromanaged, but attention must be paid to the means by and timing within which the tasks are being performed. Adjustments and comments can be made by the leader without over stepping one's bounds. At the end of the day however, goals and objectives need to be met by whatever means necessary. There is likely to be a fine balance here between the proper level of supervision and the need to provide autonomy to one's subordinates. Achieving the right levels of each will likely require some practice and fine tuning, and team members should be kept informed of the need for both supervision and autonomy/initiative, the paramount importance of meeting goals, and the process being undertaken to find the right supervisory balance.

7. Train Your Marines and Sailors as a Team

Marines believe that teamwork is critical to the success of the mission. They are encouraged to operate, train and play as a team. Marines also ensure that each member of a unit

knows his job and responsibilities. And when they train as a team, Marines strive to do so under realistic conditions.

Here are factors the Corps suggests we keep in mind when practicing this principle:

- *Stay sharp by continuously studying and training*
- *Encourage unit participation in recreational and military events*
- *Do not publicly blame an individual for the team's failure or praise just an individual for the team's success*
- *Ensure that training is meaningful, and that the purpose is clear to all members of the command*
- *Train your team based on realistic conditions*
- *Insist that every person understands the functions of the other members of the team and the function of the team as part of the unit [RP 0103 at § 3].*

These concepts are antithetical to the lone-wolf professional. He knows what he is doing, and does it well, but he is out for number one and doesn't have the time or inclination to train those around him. In his mind, subordinates should be grateful to have the opportunity to bask in his presence and will pick up some pointers by watching him do his thing along the way. The important thing is that he look good and get the credit.

We are all likely know someone who fits this profile. But while that person may be successful, that success has limitations and can't occur in his or her absence. Of course real leaders don't think or behave in this fashion. Team success requires team training. Whatever our field, we should practice working together under realistic conditions. We used to say in the Marines that the more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war. The same is true in our professions in that real world training will pay dividends when the actual evolution is undertaken. Ensure that your team members know their roles and responsibilities, and cross-train

your team members so they can perform the functions of those above and below them on the team hierarchy. Have fun and enjoy each other's company outside the professional setting from time to time. Team members who know and like each other, and who are aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses, perform at a higher level when it's crunch time.

8. *Make Sound and Timely Decisions*

This concept overlaps with the leadership trait of "decisiveness." It was driven home to me on many occasions in the field that a well-considered but timely decision, based on the best information available, is infinitely more advisable than an exhaustively analyzed decision executed much later. Marines seek to avoid "analysis paralysis" for reasons related to the advantages of tempo and maintaining the initiative in combat operations. Of late there has been a movement toward the "70% solution" which advocates making the decision when approximately that percentage of the total available information is at hand. An extreme example is the thought process which is engaged in by fighter pilots in a dog fight – they must make critical decisions very quickly, in split seconds, which decide life or death for themselves, their crew and their opponents. They don't have the luxury of hand-wringing over what the right call is or whether the decision made a moment ago was perfectly analyzed. They must make decision after decision based on the observations they are making and the tactics they want to employ, one after another, until they or the enemy is defeated (or the engagement is broken off).

Here are some methods the Marines suggest for developing your skills in this area:

- *Developing a logical and orderly thought process by practicing objective estimates of the situation*
- *When time and situation permit planning for every possible event that can reasonably be foreseen*

- *Considering the advice and suggestions of your subordinates before making decisions*
- *Considering the effects of your decisions on all members of your unit [RP 0103].*

9. *Develop a Sense of Responsibility among your Associates*

When Marines train they regularly place junior Marines in positions of authority and train them to perform one or more levels higher than their regular position. It is also engrained in Marine Corps philosophy that micro-management should be avoided. The old saying goes that sergeants are the ones that really run the Marine Corps. There is more than a kernel of truth in the adage that if officers want to get something done, and have it done right, they should tell an enlisted Marine to do it and get out of the way. The delegation of authority in the Marine Corps is the regular course of business, and any level of over-management is immediately identified and properly resented by the Marines who know they should be doing the work and accomplishing the mission without being told how to do it.

Here are suggestions from the Corps on how to develop this principle:

- *Operate through the chain of command*
- *Provide clear, well thought out directions*
- *Give your subordinates frequent opportunities to perform duties normally performed by senior personnel*
- *Be quick to recognize your subordinates' accomplishments when they demonstrate initiative and resourcefulness*
- *Correct errors in judgment and initiative in a way which will encourage the individual to try harder*
- *Give advice and assistance freely when your subordinates request it*
- *Resist the urge to micro manage*
- *Be prompt and fair in backing subordinates*

Accept responsibility willingly and insist that your subordinates live by the same standard [RP 0103].

One way that civilian leaders demonstrate loyalty to their team members is to show a keen interest in their professional development. Delegating authority and assigning tasks to subordinates builds trust, respect and confidence between a commander and his or her team members. This in turn fosters buy-in from team members in the mission and increases their initiative. By delegating tasks a leader not only demonstrates faith in the team members but increases, rather than diminishes, his or her authority. Standing by ones subordinates and demonstrating how to take ownership of both success and failure, leaders both show the way and increase the team members' appreciation and desire for increased responsibility.

10. *Employ Your Command within its Capabilities*

While it may seem counter-intuitive, Marines are not mindless automatons who engage in frontal assaults against all odds. In fact, Marines appreciate the need to assign missions to units that can achieve success. For example, when planning an attack, the rule of thumb for the ratio of attackers to defenders is three to one. Marines would not expect a squad of thirteen to go against a company of 200 (although such mismatches have been overcome in the long history of our Corps). Marine leaders must engage in that type of analysis and should not ask for more than can be realistically be delivered on the battlefield. In addition, while aggressiveness is always encouraged, and a "can do" attitude is expected among gung ho Marines, missions must be realistically tailored to a unit's capabilities. Vainglorious attempts by leaders for their units to achieve impossible goals are detrimental to unit morale. Failures which could have been avoided through a candid assessment of unit capabilities set back a leader's credibility and do significant damage to a leader's relationship with team members.

Work on the development of this leadership skill may include:

- *Avoid volunteering your unit for tasks that are beyond their capabilities*

- *Be sure that tasks assigned to subordinates are reasonable*
- *Assign tasks equally among your subordinates*
- *Use the full capabilities of your unit before requesting assistance* [RP 0103].

Clint Eastwood's character Dirty Harry once said in a film: "A man's got to know his limitations."² The same is true for a leader and his or her team. Civilian leaders must be intimately familiar with the capabilities and limitations of their groups. To use another military example, Napoleon was well known for his encyclopedic mind. He knew, and demanded constantly updated information, on the numerical strengths, weapons, equipment, average marching speeds, and commanding leadership styles for each of his many units on any given campaign. With this knowledge he would spread voluminous maps across the floor of his campaign tent and be at work for hour after hour with compass and protractor calculating exactly how to maneuver and employ his units in a manner which best utilized their capabilities and took account of their shortcomings. As professional leaders we must also have command of the realistic capabilities and best uses of our teams. And while we should also seek out responsibility and opportunities to help achieve our organization's goals, we should be wary of biting off more than our team can realistically chew.

11. *Seek Responsibilities and Take Responsibility*

Marine leaders are encouraged to seek out increasing levels of responsibility and more and more challenging assignments. They are also taught to accept responsibility for the performance of their unit. While it is commonplace for victory to have a thousand fathers and defeat to be an orphan, leaders with integrity will own their unit their failures and share unit

² *Magnum Force*, Warner Bros. (1973).

successes. Finally, Marine leaders are taught to stick with their gut and to stand by their convictions.

Here is what Marines recommend for professional development in this area:

- *Learn the duties of your immediate senior, and be prepared to accept the responsibilities of these duties*
- *Seek a variety of leadership positions that will give you experience in accepting responsibility in different fields*
- *Take every opportunity that offers increased responsibility*
- *Perform every task, no matter whether it is top secret or seemingly trivial, to the best of your ability*
- *Stand up for what you think is right. Have courage in your convictions*
- *Carefully evaluate a subordinate's failure before taking action against that subordinate*
- *In the absence of orders, take the initiative to perform the actions you believe your senior would direct you to perform if present [RP 0103].*

These concepts are easily applicable to our civilian professional lives. As mentioned above, as leaders we should be on the lookout for opportunities for our people to shine and grow. Part of being a leader also involves taking ownership of failures and shortcomings in your team's performance. When you win, let the group bask in the glow of that victory. You didn't accomplish that yourself and your team will very much appreciate being recognized. Finally, don't be a wilting flower – stand by your convictions when necessary. But when a decision is made, even if you don't agree with it, set your ego aside and get on board for the effort to accomplish the mission.

C. CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the close of this humble effort to codify and explain those intangibles which we loosely call "leadership," keep in mind these final thoughts. Leadership is really a combination

of a group's ethos (or group values) and those more tangible elements of its leadership philosophy. Successful leaders understand their group dynamics and integrate that understanding with the tools in their leadership toolbox. By doing so, they strive to fashion the most effective and compelling plans to achieve particular goals. From the start, Marines are expected to be students of the concepts which have been discussed here. That is only part of their education in what more globally is considered the art and science of war. But you too can be a student and master teacher of your craft. Think about approaching team development as an opportunity to pass along hard won secrets or understandings – all for the good of the group's success. Imbue your work with an almost mystical and artistic quality such that your team members will see the beauty in the systems or methods which you are training them to employ. Finally, winning is fun and never underestimate the power of having fun while working on how to win more often.