

Leadership: A Return to Basics

General Edward C. Meyer, US Army

The late 1970s and early 1980s were trying times for the US Army as it struggled to recover from Vietnam and establish a credible All-Volunteer Force. During these years, Army senior leaders tried various leadership theories and slogans. By 1980, however, they returned to more traditional leadership methods. In this July 1980 lead article, then Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. "Shy" Meyer reflects this shift as he distinguishes between leadership and management. While acknowledging a place for management in the Army, Meyer clearly stipulates the primacy of leadership in soldiering.

WHEN I BECAME CHIEF OF STAFF, I set two personal goals for myself. The first was to ensure that the Army was continually prepared to go to war, and the second was to create a climate in which each individual member could find personal meaning and fulfillment. It is my belief that only by attainment of the second goal will we ensure the first.

The most modern equipment in the world is useless without motivated individuals, willingly drilled into cohesive unit organizations by sound leadership at all levels. Expert planning, Department of the Army pamphlets, regulations and field manuals will not of themselves rescue the disaffected soldier from apathetic performance of his or her duty. Neither the soldier nor his comrades will survive the first challenge of either the modern world or of the battlefield outside a climate of active and concerned leadership. Because we are a community, a way of life, we cannot isolate our concern to only one of these environments. Our commitment must be complete if we expect dedication returned in kind.

The clear linkage is that our ability to go to war hinges critically on the quality of leadership within the US Army; leadership, what James MacGregor Burns called "one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth."¹

Napoleon listed 115 contributing qualities in trying to define the essentials of leadership. We have no way of knowing if his description was complete at number 115 or if he was otherwise distracted. Some authorities focus on three, five or 10 aspects, while others, perhaps

more wisely, begin and end their list with only one, or describe broad theories about leadership. None of these efforts is complete, yet none of them is useless either, if they assist the professional who already has a firm grasp on fundamentals to better understand and practice leadership.

Need for a Renaissance

Is there a need for a renaissance in the art of military leadership today? I think so. Not because I sense an Army starved for adequate example, but because the circumstances have been such over the past several decades that confusing models vie for attention. Some are woefully deficient and totally inappropriate for tomorrow's battlefield.

We need to discuss openly the fact that we have been lavish in our rewards to those who have demonstrated excellence in sophisticated business and management techniques. These talents are worthwhile to a leader, but, of themselves, they are not leadership. We need to discuss openly the impact that six-month command tours in Vietnam may have had on the perception of a commander's commitment. Under the circumstances of that war, it may have been unavoidable. In the process, have we eroded essential values?

We need to recognize that we have lived through an era in which this country enjoyed massive nuclear superiority. Previously, it was possible to accept less than optimal decisions in the certainty that very few things relating to land forces could be of critical

consequence. That is, given our massive, nuclear advantage, only a madman would have challenged us directly. That is no longer the case. Today, we need sensitivity and backbone beyond that which the past several decades have demanded.

We need a renaissance in the art and practice of leadership because this country cannot suffer through the same agonies in a future mobilization which time permitted us to correct the last time around.

The early maneuvers of 1940 turned a harsh spotlight on the then current “training weaknesses of the Army: lack of equipment, poor minor tactics, *lack of basic leadership in many units, and some inept command leadership by officers of high rank.*”² This despite the pre-1940 emphasis of the Regular Army on leadership, administration and technical skills. What was uncovered was a proficient relationship between the leader and the led, rooted in peacetime administration—but insufficiently developed to withstand the rigor of combat.

General George Marshall’s strategy was to correct the weakness “by arduous training and by the more drastic solution of eliminating the unfit.”³ We are precisely on that track today. But the climate is somehow different. The leader of the 1940s was training to go to war with his unit for the duration. There was no certainty that at some point he would be plucked out of his situation in adherence to a rigid career development pattern. His career extended only to the bounds of developing his unit so it could survive in combat. He would likely see it through there or at an echelon or two above that unit, still dependent upon its continued excellence.

We would be wrong today to invoke a “for the duration” mentality which excluded preparing the force for its future. That is an essential. But we need to root out those situations where such progression denies full loyalty and devotion to the soldier and the unit.

Despite some of its narrowness, for there was only one way, “the Army way,” the Army of World War II was a professional force of immense energy whose traditions were strong and whose values were clear. Service parochialism and narrowness helped to spawn a revolution under Robert McNamara in the early 1960s which sought to rationalize interservice resource demands by the adoption and adaptation of business-oriented management techniques. The intent was that the Department of Defense could and should operate as effectively and efficiently as private enterprise.

Ironically, some of the techniques were ones developed by the military during World War II to

achieve high-priority goals in specific sectors of our war machine (strategic bombing, weapons development, antisubmarine warfare).

At no time did anyone say, “Let’s have an Army of managers—leaders are passé.” However, once the system became firmly entrenched, its power and grasp implied to many that the newly arrived technocrat was an attractive alternative career model. Imperceptibly at first, then with a rush, the traditional focus of leadership slipped for many into the abyss as increasing emphasis was placed on management and specialization. Excellence in its theories and principles became for many an alternative to leadership. Unfortunately forgotten was the fact that employees of Sears Roebuck and Company or General Motors Corporation were not asked to give up their lives for corporate cost-effectiveness!

Leadership and management are neither synonymous nor interchangeable. Clearly, good civilian managers must lead, and good military leaders must manage. Both qualities are essential to success. The size and complexity of today’s Army, given no overabundance of resources, requires the use of managerial techniques. Their use is essential if we are to maintain and improve our posture.

Accordingly, such training and practice are important. But the leader must know when and how to apply them, never forgetting that the purpose of an Army is to fight. And, to fight effectively, it must be led. Managers can put the most modern and well-equipped force into the field. They cannot, however, *manage* an infantry unit through training or *manage* it up a hill into enemy fire to seize an objective.

Two Lessons

In this context, two lessons are important—first, techniques which work well for the management of resources may prove disastrous when substituted for leadership on the battlefield. Conversely, techniques which work well for the battlefield may prove disastrous when substituted for management. Management and leadership are coequally important—not substitutes for one another.

Strong personal leadership is as necessary today as at anytime in our history. That which soldiers are willing to sacrifice their lives for—loyalty, team spirit, morale, trust and confidence—cannot be infused by managing. The attention we need to invest in our soldiers far exceeds that which is possible through any centralized management system. To the degree that such systems assist efficient operation, they are good. To the degree that they interfere with essential relationships between the unit and its leader, they are

disruptive. Management techniques have limitations which leaders need to identify and curb to preclude destructive side effects.

Just as overmanagement can be the death of an Army, so can undermanagement, which deprives units of essential resources. Leaders need to be active to identify either extreme, for either can impact on the ultimate success of committed forces.

The kind of leadership we need is founded upon consideration and respect for the soldier. That thought is not new. Over 400 years ago, Machiavelli's prince was taught that "... in order to retain his fidelity [he] ought to think of his minister, honoring and enriching him, doing him kindness, and conferring upon him honors and giving him responsible tasks..."⁴

Repeated through the ages by others, the message-like an overworked popular recording-may have lost its freshness. Societally accustomed as we are to discarding the old for the cleverness of the new, we weary of redundancy and look for the new buzz word, the new turn of phrase: VOLAR (Volunteer Army), DIMES (Defense Integrated Management Engineering Systems), Zero Defects, Management by Objective, Organizational Effectiveness, and so forth. Again, let me remind you, these are all good management-related programs, but not if they replace the essence of leadership essential to an effective Army.

There are no tricks or gimmicks in the watchwords of General John M. Schofield, and I commend them to you: "The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself, while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself."⁵

The summation of leadership leaves the reader to supply his personal "tag line." The premise involves a cultivated feeling by the leader for the attitudes, needs, desires, ambitions and disappointments of the soldier-without which no real communication can exist.

Leaders cannot, must not, blind themselves to a one-answer, one-method scientology. They must discover the method best suited to motivate and employ *each* soldier. Time and one's earnest interest are necessary regardless of method. The end result is an organization which is ready and willing to follow despite hardship or adversity.

In our business, these are much more prevalent than elsewhere in our society. There are obvious hardships associated with battle; there are also the hardships of peacetime duty—coping economically in a foreign land, coping with old and run-down facilities, coping with

constraints on training resources, to name a few. All these will be accepted and creatively overcome by units whose members sense their leader's genuine interest and commitment to their welfare. Abraham Lincoln said that "You can't fool all the people all of the time."⁶ To that, I would add that *you cannot fool a soldier anytime!* The leader who tries chooses a hazardous path.

Types of Leadership

How concern and respect are manifested by each of us is the essence of leadership. Just as there are two types of diamonds—gem and industrial quality—there are two types of leadership. The first type, the gem quality, is functional if we only desire our leadership to appear beautiful. The second, or industrial quality, though not cleaved, faceted and polished, is the more functional because it uses are creative. The Army's need is for the industrial quality, the creative quality of leadership.

Just as the diamond requires three properties for its formation—carbon, heat and pressure—successful leaders require the interaction of three properties—character, knowledge and application.

Like carbon to the diamond, character is the basic quality of the leader. It is embodied in the one who, in General [Omar] Bradley's words, "has high ideals, who stands by them, and who can be trusted absolutely."⁷

Character is an ingrained principle expressed consciously and unconsciously to subordinates, superiors and peers alike—honesty, loyalty, courage, self-confidence, humility and self-sacrifice. Its expression to all audiences must ring with authenticity.

But as carbon alone does not create a diamond, neither can character alone create a leader. The diamond needs heat. Man needs knowledge, study and preparation. The novice leader may possess the honesty and decisiveness of a General Marshall or Patton, but, if he or she lacks the requisite knowledge, there is no benchmark from which that character can take form. A leader must be able to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, as it says in the Cadet Prayer [US Military Academy, West Point, New York], but the distinction cannot be made in practice unless the leader possesses knowledge equal to the situation.

General George Patton, once accused of making snap decisions, replied: "I've been studying the art of war for forty-odd years. When a surgeon decides in the course of an operation to change its objective ... he is not making a snap decision but one based on knowledge, experience and training. So am I."⁸

To lead, you must know your soldiers, yourself and your profession. The third property, pressure—acting in conjunction with carbon and heat—forms the diamond.

Similarly, one's character, attended by knowledge, blooms through application to produce a leader.

Generally, this is expressed through teaching or training-grooming and shaping people and things into smoothly functioning units. It takes many forms. It begins by setting the example and the day-to-day development of subordinates by giving distinct, challenging tasks and allowing free exercise of responsibility to accomplish the task. It extends through tactical drill, weapons operation and maintenance, operational planning, resource management, and so forth. Finally, it is the imparting of knowledge to superiors, for they must digest the whole of their organizations and rely increasingly on judgments from below.

Individual Growth

These three properties, brought together, form, like the industrial diamond, a hard, durable creative leader. As the industrial stone is used to cut glass, drill for petroleum products and even for creation of the brilliant gem diamond, leadership works to create cohesive, ready, viable units through a climate which expresses itself in its concern for the growth of the individual.

Growth in a single dimension, that limited to excellence in applied military skills, is only part of the challenge to today's leadership. Alone, it runs the risk of buying single-dimensioned commitment. Full dedication comes by providing a basis for rounded

individual development pertinent to survival in life in its broadest aspects.

Today's soldiers seek to become capable citizens across the four critical dimensions of man. The Army, through its leaders, can assist their development mentally, physically, spiritually and socially, equipping them for survival in and out of uniform. Each soldier meaningfully assisted toward development as a whole man, a whole person, is more likely to respond with his or her full commitment.

The leader who chooses to ignore the soldier's search for individual growth may reap a bitter fruit of disillusionment, discontent and listlessness. If we, instead, reach out to touch each soldier—to meet needs and assist in working toward the goal of becoming a "whole person"—we will have bridged the essential needs of the individual to find not only the means of coming together into an effective unit, but the means of holding together.

Then, we will have effected a tool capable of fulfilling the purpose for which we exist: our ability to go to war. We can then hopefully influence the decision of those who might be tempted to challenge our nation.

As with all scientific and artistic endeavors, one begins with basics. We must get back to the established basics of leadership. They provide the foundation from which our Army draws its inspiration, its capability and, ultimately, its effectiveness. **MR**

NOTES

1. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., N.Y., 1978, p 2.
2. Department of the Army Pamphlet 20-212, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army, 1775-1945*, by Lieutenant Colonel Marvin A Kreidberg and First Lieutenant Merton G. Henry, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 1956, p 606.
3. Ibid.
4. Niccolo di Bernardo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1513.

5. Speech by General John M. Schofield to the Corps of Cadets, US Military Academy, West Point, NY.
6. Lincoln to a caller at the White House, in Alexander K. McClure, *Lincoln's Yarns and Stories*, J.C. Winston Co., Chicago, IL, 1904, p 24.
7. General of the Army Omar N. Bradley, "Leadership," *Parameters*, Winter 1972, p 7.
8. Edgar F. Puryear, *Nineteen Stars*, Green Publishers Inc., Orange, VA, 1971, p 382.

General Edward C. Meyer, US Army, Retired, is a managing partner with Cilluffo Associates L.P. and chairman of MITRETEK, Arlington, Virginia. He also is the president of Army Emergency Relief, a trustee of the George C. Marshall Foundation and a member of several boards of directors. He retired as Army chief of staff after serving during the Carter and Reagan administrations from June 1979 to June 1983. His other positions included deputy chief of staff for Operations and Plans, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.; commander, 3d Infantry Division (Mechanized), Würzburg, Germany; deputy chief of staff for Operations, US Army, Europe and Seventh Army, Heidelberg, Germany; and deputy commandant, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. He also served two combat tours in Vietnam.