

Leadership for the 21st Century: **Empowerment, Environment** and the **Golden Rule**

General Dennis J. Reimer, US Army

This January-February 1996 lead article is one of three Army Chief of Staff General Dennis J. Reimer has written for Military Review. His command philosophy is simple: Leaders should do “what is legally and morally right;” create an environment tolerant of mistakes and free of the zero-defects mentality, where soldiers can achieve their potential; and live by the “Golden Rule,” which puts caring, respect and fairness for soldiers first.

AT A STAFF MEETING one morning, the colonel reprimanded the post quartermaster because the parade-ground flagpole was not perpendicular. Then, pointing to a lieutenant, he snapped: ‘Lieutenant, if I told you to put up a flagpole and get it straight, how would you go about it?’ ‘I’d say, sergeant, erect the flagpole,’” the lieutenant replied.¹

The lieutenant in this story, Samuel Sturgis, went on to become a lieutenant general and the chief of Army engineers. This anecdote about him is not unique. Incidents like this happen every day in America’s Army and help explain the essence of US Army leadership.

Secretary of Defense William Perry likes to relate a story about General Andrei Nikolayev, deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, when Nikolayev was on a two-week tour of military bases in the United States. After visiting the first base and seeing our noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in action, he told one of his aides, “I know that these men and women wearing sergeants’ uniforms are really officers in disguise.”²

But as he went from base to base and talked with the NCOs, Nikolayev came to realize they really were not officers. He was stunned and after two weeks told Perry that, “No military in the world has the quality of NCO ... found in the United States.” He went on

to say, “That’s what gives America its competitive military advantage.” Our NCOs are one reason we have the best military in the world.

As the Army chief of staff, my fundamental duty is to ensure America’s Army is trained and ready to defend the nation’s security and freedom. I am also concerned with creating stability within the force after a long and significant draw down. I want to create an environment in which all soldiers can “be all they can be.”

Countering “Zero Defects”

Recently, I reviewed the Army Research Institute’s (ARI’s) command climate assessment, which was based on responses from more than 24,000 Active, Reserve and National Guard soldiers and civilians. While none of us will agree with all the assessment’s findings, all of us will be troubled by the perceptions it portrays. Some excerpts from this report follow:

- The state of ethical conduct is abysmal. Few battalion commanders can afford integrity in a zero defects environment. Telling the truth ends careers quicker than making stupid mistakes or getting caught doing something wrong. I have seen many good officers slide into ethical compromise.

- There is a return to the “zero defects” and ticket-punching mentality of the 1960s and 1970s that nearly destroyed the officer corps.

- The Army is a zero defects organization.
- My concern is with some officers' attitudes. The problem is not division of officer and NCO duties. Granted, some duties are and should be interchangeable. Some officers, however, want to do it all. They

Leaders today should be devoted to selfless service. Marshall said, "It is amazing what gets done when nobody worries about who gets the credit." Leaders should take their guidance from the top but focus on their soldiers. If your focus is on soldiers, then you are doing the right thing. Focusing on "the boss" leads to the attitudes we are trying to stamp out today.

want to conduct training, micromanage and have junior soldiers and civilians report directly to them. They are basically giving their NCOs responsibility and titles but not authority. I do not believe they do this because the NCOs or civilians cannot do their jobs. It is more of an officer efficiency report support form thing and crisis management.

These attitudes are disturbing—but not unexpected. The draw down has been difficult for the Army. Since 1989, we have cut 450,000 people (Active and Reserve) out of the force. This has been hard on soldiers and their families. What is amazing is that through the draw down, we have remained trained and ready. We successfully executed missions in Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti and we have not repeated the mistakes of past draw downs. In his 1948 annual report, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall noted that "the enormous turnover of personnel made effective unit training virtually impossible."

Creating Positive Leadership

Now, as the draw down ends, we must display positive, creative leadership, stamp out this zero defects mentality and create an environment where all soldiers can reach their full potential. I would like to share some ideas on how to create this leadership environment.

I recommend Major General John M. Schofield's concept of leadership to all leaders. I first learned his concept 37 years ago, and it is as true today as when Schofield said it in 1879. "The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh and tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an Army. It is possible to impart instruction and to give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and

tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. 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."³

The fundamental truth, as General Creighton W. Abrams used to say in the mid-1970s, is that the Army is not made up of people. The Army is people. Every decision we make is a people issue. An officer's primary responsibility is to develop people and enable them to reach their full potential. All our soldiers are volunteers. They come from diverse backgrounds, but they all have goals they want to accomplish. We must create an environment where they truly can be all they can be.

Good leaders know their soldiers' strengths and weaknesses. This is the key to success. People's names are important. Commanders should learn the names of their people. Nothing impresses soldiers more than leaders who know their soldiers' names. I recall an incident that impressed me following a battalion change of command several years ago. At the reception, the outgoing battalion commander greeted each soldier, officer and spouse by name. He made a point of asking a question about each soldier's family. The division commander remarked, "He may be the only battalion commander in the Army who can do that. . . . And I guarantee you that not one member of his battalion will ever forget him, and many will seek to serve under him again."

Taking Care of People

My leadership philosophy is very, very simple. It can be summed up in three basic points. First, if we empower people to do what is legally and morally right, there is no limit to the good we can accomplish. That is all I ask of anyone: Do what is right. Leaders must look to their soldiers and focus on the good. No soldier wakes up in the morning and says, "Okay, how am I going to screw this up today?" Soldiers want to do good and commanders should give them that opportunity. An outstanding soldier, Command Sergeant Major Richard Cayton, the former US Forces Command (FORSCOM) sergeant major, summed up a leader's responsibility this way: "Your soldiers will walk a path and they will come to a crossroad; if you are standing at the crossroad, where you belong, you can guide your soldiers to the right path and make them successful."

The second point of my leadership philosophy is to create an environment where people can be all they can be. Many soldiers enlisted under this recruiting slogan, and we have a responsibility to assist them in



Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. The long honor roll of American men and women who have gone before us has established a reputation of professionalism, dedication and self-sacrifice that has made America's Army legendary. This rich legacy of courage and soldierly tradition is what makes our Army second to none.

Leaders create command climate. Positive leadership can eliminate micromanagement, careerism, integrity violations and the zero defects mind-set.... Major General James Utino once said that morale exists when “a soldier thinks that his army is the best in the world, his regiment is the best in the army, his company is the best in the regiment, his squad the best in the company, and that he himself is the best damned soldier in the outfit.” Our job as leaders is to foster that attitude and morale.

developing mentally, physically, spiritually and socially to their full potential. It is essential that leaders develop the initiative of subordinates.

Our doctrine values the initiative, creativity and problem-solving ability of soldiers at all levels. Valuing these traits has always been the hallmark of America's Army. In the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant's instructions to Major General William T. Sherman reflect this concept: "I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of campaign... But simply to lay down the work it is desirable to have done and leave you free to execute it in your own way." During World War II, Lieutenant General George S. Patton Jr. allowed his subordinates to be all they could be by being tolerant

of their errors. He said, "Never tell people how to do things, tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."⁴

Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower's guidance for the invasion of Europe remains the classic example of this concept. He was told, "You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces."⁵

The third point of my leadership philosophy is to treat others as you would have them treat you. A leader must have compassion—a "basic respect for the dignity of each individual; treating all with dignity and

Treat others as you would have them treat you.... This is a simple restatement of the Golden Rule—but it is a critical issue. Every soldier must feel he is being treated fairly and that you care and are making an honest attempt to ensure he or she reaches full potential. Initiative will be stifled and creativity destroyed unless soldiers feel they have been given a fair chance to mature and grow.

respect.”⁶ This is a simple restatement of the Golden Rule—but it is a critical issue. Every soldier must feel he is being treated fairly and that you care and are making an honest attempt to ensure he or she reaches full potential. Initiative will be stifled and creativity destroyed unless soldiers feel they have been given a fair chance to mature and grow.

There is nothing extraordinary about these three points. They are very simple, but I challenge you to think about them.

Building Character

The perceptions in ARI’s assessment can only be overcome by positive leadership. The individual leader’s character is key to the climate within the command. A good leader must have compassion, courage, candor, competence and commitment. I have already talked about compassion—the Golden Rule. By courage, I mean both physical and moral courage. The history of America’s Army is full of examples of physical bravery and courage. Examples of moral courage are equally as important but not as well known.

The perceptions expressed in *Army Assessment 95* are not new. The fear of delegating authority to subordinates is not a new phenomenon. The zero defects mentality—where a commander feels his command must be error free—is not new. But we must possess the moral courage to deny this damaging philosophy that says it is worse to report a mistake than it is to make one. This lack of moral courage in peacetime can have disastrous results in battle. General Matthew B. Ridgway described this as a challenge of moral courage, saying, “It has long seemed to me that the hard decisions are not the ones you make in the heat of battle. Far harder to make are those involved in speaking your mind about some hare-brained scheme which proposes to commit troops to action under conditions where failure seems almost certain, and the only results will be the needless sacrifice of priceless lives.”⁷

Courage. General George C. Marshall, echoing Ridgway’s sentiment, described the need for leaders with the moral courage to tell their superiors when they

are wrong. “It is hard to get men to do this, for this is when you lay your career, perhaps your commission, on the line.”⁸

Accurate readiness reporting may require a measure of *moral courage*. Nobody is going to tell you how to report your unit’s readiness. You must make that call. I ask that you make that report as honestly and realistically as you can. Tell us what is wrong. I can assure you that I read the readiness reports that come up from the divisions.

When I was the FORSCOM commander, three divisions fell below the C2 readiness level.⁹ I am not proud of that, but I was proud of a system that allowed those commanders to tell it like it was. They reported readiness as they saw it. They did not compromise their standards and were willing to stand up and set an example. I ask all leaders to do the same.

Candor. Another character trait closely associated with courage is *candor*. Candor is a two-way street. Honesty is as important to a subordinate as it is to a superior. Mentoring and coaching are the best ways I know of to stamp out the zero defects mentality. Soldiers must grow and learn from their mistakes. We must allow subordinates to have the freedom to fail. We must give them the benefit of the doubt if they are honestly trying.

We must coach and mentor our young officers and NCOs and spend time with subordinates, talking with them face-to-face about their performance. Everyone wants feedback. We need to tell soldiers when they make mistakes and then coach them to succeed. There is nothing more important than taking the time to mentor subordinates. General William Creech, a great Air Force innovator and leader, said it best: “The first duty of any leader is to create more leaders.”¹⁰

Part of mentoring is listening to soldiers. You can always learn from them. As a battalion commander, I had a problem in recovery operations. It always took an inordinately long time to refuel all the battalion’s vehicles after field operations. One day, the fuel truck driver told me how it could be done in one-fourth the time. His solution was so simple I am embarrassed to reveal it. He suggested that instead of having the fuel truck go through the motor pool to top off each vehicle, the vehicles should drive through a refueling station before going to the motor pool. The soldier closest to the issue solved a major problem.

Competence. A third character trait of good leaders is *competence*. As General Douglas MacArthur said, “There is no substitute for victory.”¹¹ The public trusts us with their most precious asset—their sons and daughters. They do not question what we do with them. They trust us to train them to survive on the battlefield. This is a tremendous responsibility and we, as leaders, must

continue to earn that trust by our professionalism and competence. I count on each leader to not only know your job, but to strive to be the best in their respective fields.

America's Army must be trained and ready for victory, which entails more than defeating the fourth largest army in the world in less than 100 hours. Victory is also providing military support to civilian leadership in other operations. Leaders must conduct tough, realistic training, and we will continue to focus on the National Training Center, Joint Readiness Training Center and Combat Maneuver Training Center. We do not need to get more out of less, but we must get more out of what we do. I would like to do fewer training events but ensure we get the most out of each one we do conduct.

To accomplish our missions, many of our soldiers have had back-to-back deployments and extended separations from their families. On average, American soldiers assigned to a troop unit now spend 138 days a year away from home. Many special units, such as military police, air defense and transportation, have been carrying a heavier load. Operations tempo is high. Thus, leaders must help reduce stress in units. One way to do this is by predictability. The duty roster must be kept in line with US Army Field Manual (FM) 25-100, *Training the Force*. Some soldiers contend they do not know what is going to happen two weeks out because the duty roster has not been published yet. They do not know if they are going to work on the weekend or not.

Leaders must correct this unpredictability. The FM 25-100 training doctrine allows us to plan in advance. We should lock in training events five weeks in advance, and soldiers should know a month out if they are off on a

weekend--and we must honor that commitment to them. Improved predictability for our soldiers must be a goal.

Commitment. The final character trait of a good leader is *commitment*. MacArthur had the best definition of commitment—"Duty, honor, country. These three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be."¹²

Leaders today should be devoted to selfless service. Marshall said, "It is amazing what gets done when nobody worries about who gets the credit." Leaders should take their guidance from the top but focus on their soldiers. If your focus is on soldiers, then you are doing the right thing. Focusing on "the boss" leads to the attitudes we are trying to stamp out today.

Leaders create command climate. Positive leadership can eliminate micromanagement, careerism, integrity violations and the zero defects mind-set. These attitudes are an unfortunate side effect of the turmoil created by the downsizing of our Army. These attitudes have appeared in the past—but we defeated them. We will do so again.

America's Army is unique in the world. Our advantage is the creativity, initiative and ingenuity of our soldiers. To foster this advantage, we must be willing to underwrite honest mistakes, focus on soldiers and mentor the next generation of leaders.

Major General James Utino once said that morale exists when "a soldier thinks that his army is the best in the world, his regiment is the best in the army, his company is the best in the regiment, his squad the best in the company, and that he himself is the best damned soldier in the outfit." Our job as leaders is to foster that attitude and morale. **MR**

NOTES

1. Lewis Sorley, "The Leader as Practicing Manager," in *Military Leadership*, edited by James H. Buck and Lawrence J. Korb (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1981), 187.
2. Secretary of Defense William Perry, speech (Fort Polk, LA: August 1995).
3. MG John M. Schofield, address to the US Military Academy (USMA) corps of cadets (West Point, NY: 11 August 1879).
4. John T. Nelsen II, "Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Leadership," in *The Challenge of Military Leadership*, edited by Lloyd Matthews and Dale E. Brown (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989), 26-39.
5. Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1951), 457.
6. US Army Field Manual (FM) 100-1, *The Army* (Washington, DC: GPO, June 1994), 9.
7. GEN Matthew B. Ridgway, "Leadership," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, edited by Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1984), 27.
8. *Ibid.*
9. C2 is a unit readiness level related to personnel, equipment and training. A C2 level means it would take 29 days or more for a unit to become combat ready.
10. James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1995), 333.
11. GEN Douglas MacArthur, address to Congress (Washington, DC: 19 April 1951).
12. MacArthur, Thayer Award address to the USMA corps of cadets (West Point, NY: May 1962).

General Dennis J. Reimer has been US Army chief of staff since June 1995. His previous positions include commander in chief, US Army Forces Command, Fort McPherson, Georgia; vice chief of staff, and deputy chief of staff for Operations and Plans, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.; commander, 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized), Fort Carson, Colorado; chief of staff, US Army Element, Combined Field Army, Seoul, Korea; and commander, III Corps Artillery, and deputy assistant commandant, US Army Field Artillery School, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He also served in Germany with V Corps and 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized), as well as two tours in Vietnam.