

# Notes on Leadership for the 1980s

Major General Walter F. Ulmer Jr., US Army

*In this July 1980 article, then Major General Walter F. Ulmer Jr., 3d Armored Division commander, expresses concern about the Army's organizational climate and its impact on leadership effectiveness. He calls for a return to basics-discipline, rewards for excellence, strong physical training—at a time when Operation Desert One, the US attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran, failed, embarrassing the United States and its Armed Forces. In Ulmer's opinion, a healthy organization and sound leadership reinforce each other to the benefit of all.*

**A**NECDOTAL MATERIALS ON leadership in the US Army have not changed much over the past 40 years. In the general sense, there have been no “breakthroughs.” We have seen the discussions of leader “traits” give way to a broader discussion of leader “behavior” and the leadership “processes” within different levels of the organization.

Such documents as the Leadership Monograph Series (*Leadership for the 1970s*) produced by the US Army War College (USAWC) and the US Army Administration Center, and the text *A Study of Organizational Leadership*, edited by the office of Military Leadership (now the Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership) at the US Military Academy, along with the current version of Field Manual 22-100, *Military Leadership*, seem to provide plenty of background material. However, these comprehensive explorations into theory and practice do not address in detail the impact of the organizational climate on the effectiveness of individual leadership.

Several ongoing excursions—such as the US Army Training and Doctrine Command's Task Force Delta—are exploring the complex relationships and processes within military organizations. Elements within the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, the USAWC, the Army Research Institute for Behavioral and Social Sciences and others are probing the contemporary organizational climate. And well they should. We may have to spend more of our teaching efforts on the analysis of the climate in which we lead than on individual leadership methods—although all of us need continuing education in both of these subject areas.

We do not have any real options on whether or not we collectively upgrade our individual leadership skills and

improve the climate within which we lead. Motivation, spirit, mutual trust and pride are the real force multipliers. They always have been. Basically, the essentials of good individual leadership have changed little over the ages. Good leadership still does great things. However, it is my contention that poor leadership today is much less tolerable—much more dysfunctional—than it was 30 years ago.

It may be that in studying deeply the mechanics of human motivation and the hierarchy of needs, we have not always remembered that leadership in troop units is accomplished within the context of a disciplined, mission-oriented organization. At least we want the unit to be disciplined and mission-oriented. And, for both pragmatic and moral reasons, we want leaders to be as sensitive as possible to the legitimate needs and expectations of each soldier. But leadership is first and primarily a means of getting the leader's mission done efficiently.

Units today are more complex than they were 20 years ago. Both machines, doctrine and groups of young people are more complicated. The ratio of important missions to materiel and human resources is high—perhaps at an all-time high. The 1980s will challenge leaders at all echelons, and these challenges will be substantially different in magnitude although often of fundamentally the same nature as in years gone by. In order for good leaders to function well for extended periods, the organizational climate must be routinely supportive. The “hostile training environment” and the “environmental alienation of leaders” mentioned in recent studies just will not suffice.

As we attempt to peel away the layers of superficial causality and dig down to the core of the organizational

climate problem, there appear to be four basic elements of concern. These are relatively scarce material resources, an increasingly complex battlefield—even down to the rifle squad level, a growing percentage of soldiers who have difficulty learning and adjusting and some lingering doubts within the officer corps regarding its operative value system.

George Will wrote in a recent editorial: “Never before in this nation’s experience have the values and expectations in society been more at variance with the values and expectations that are indispensable to a military establishment.”

“Never” is a long time, but, in any case, the leader today cannot assume that the organizational goals are quickly understood and assimilated by all of his subordinates. The leader must *earn* a heavier percentage of the necessary respect than his predecessors of 30 years ago, and he must be supported by a credible organization.

Not only societal values, but the more mundane facts of life impact on the leaders’ ability to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence. For example, the spectacle of the world’s richest nation not being able to fix the leaky plumbing in the mess hall simply raises soldier doubts regarding the credibility of the entire chain of command. In the same vein, I would guess that a clumsy, erratic class IX supply system as seen from the motor pool end of the pipe has caused almost as much discouragement among young soldiers in recent years as has some of the heavy-handed, callous leadership that pokes its head up here and there.

In a time of complexity and relative austerity, commanders must make definite, clear choices regarding priorities, and then they must support the priorities with more than words. We may be recognizing this need as an institution, with our senior leadership serious about stamping out the “Zero Defects” and “Can Do” syndromes that have delighted the bureaucrats and frustrated the commanders for *years*.

Part of repairing the organizational climate depends on all of our willingness to share the risks and tolerate selected managerial imperfections. There appear to be signs of growing organizational maturity such as neutralizing some of the itinerant inspectors whose terrorization tactics have upset training and discipline priorities for years and recognizing that the best echelon to do something is the *lowest* one that can handle

it. Our efforts to unscramble the stresses and strains at battalion level should reap a great harvest in enhanced leadership effectiveness.

As we attempt to select, educate and then trust our leaders, we must provide them a disciplined environment in which to serve. Our young soldiers keep signaling that they expect an Army to be tough and fair. We are still not responding adequately to their expectations of a well-structured, challenging, no-nonsense environment.

Each time we strengthen the chain of command by dissolving another counsel, insisting that the tank commander inspect his soldiers every day and take necessary corrective action, reward excellence publicly, bar those soldiers from re-enlisting who cannot perform satisfactorily and conduct end-of-the-day remedial physical training, we provide a tonic for good leadership. Leadership and discipline go hand in hand.

Realizing in this day and age that even within a healthy organization the individual leader must establish somewhat independently his own credibility, the portrayal of competence has never been more important. Leaders have to know their job and show it. Although many of our soldiers have remarkably high expectations of what their leaders should be, most do not expect miracles. But they do not tolerate the careless or the vacillating leader very well.

On the other hand, a local leadership reputation of firm, competent and fair is the best (maybe the only) antidote for the pernicious “meltdown of trust” syndrome which is an unfortunate characteristic of contemporary Western civilization. So, in effect, a healthy organizational climate enhances the development of individual leadership, and successful leadership contributes to the robustness of the organizational climate.

A final note is that proper individual value systems within the officer corps are essential both to good leadership and to healthy organizations. The willingness to make sacrifices, to take risks in the interest of the mission and the soldiers, to look deeply inside and figure out what really motivates us are simply key to building a climate of special trust and confidence. In assessing our value systems, we need to address the operative relative priorities of self, superior, subordinate, unit and professional ethics—and try not to kid ourselves as we make the analysis and pledge to move ever closer to what we know is right. **MR**

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