



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey jokes with 2nd Cavalry Regiment soldiers 9 September 2015 as he presents them with command excellence coins during a visit to Rose Barracks in Vilseck, Germany. Dailey remains popular with troops because he listens to their concerns and acts to resolve them. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Jennifer Bunn, U.S. Army)

# The Essence of Leadership

## Trustworthiness

Sara VanderClute

I have never been a military officer, but like many military family members, I have been aware of and influenced by several leaders during and since my husband's decades of Army service. He retired in 1988, so it is as civilians, living near Fort Bragg, North Carolina, that we have been observing military leaders over the past few decades. Some have become famous, some infamous. Each has reinforced my belief that among leadership's many facets—enthusiasm, fairness, competence, selflessness—the

essence of leadership is trustworthiness based on integrity.

The Army leaders at Fort Bragg are well integrated into the civilian community, whether they reside on post or off. The local chamber of commerce

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includes a military affairs committee, and military leaders socialize within the civilian community. They keep local political leaders informed of developments in the Department of Defense that might affect local municipalities. These military leaders are the neighbors,

officer corps and enlisted ranks, have achieved notable careers in business or politics after leaving military service. Enthusiasm, fairness, competence, and selflessness continue to exist in people who take their leadership into civilian careers and communities—



You know you're a good leader when people follow you [even if only] out of curiosity.

-Gen. Colin Powell, U.S. Army, retired



the customers, the fellow churchgoers, and the friends of local residents. They are esteemed as being the very best of our nation's military forces, and they are greatly admired for their personal accomplishments and sacrifices in serving our country. Most of all, local residents can trust them to be honest and straightforward.

There is no single template for the personality of a leader. While my husband served, we knew some Army leaders who were quiet, wryly humorous, and intellectual, and others who were dynamic, volatile, and endowed with a colorful vocabulary. Some were crusty, old-style, old-school soldiers. Others were lightyears ahead of their contemporaries in perceiving how the future would develop. In the era during which my husband served, transitions were taking place that included more opportunities for female soldiers and more overt considerations of military families' needs. Some leaders embraced these changes; others held the belief that if the Army wanted you to have a family, it would have issued you one.

I learned during my stint as an active-duty Army wife that excellent Army leadership was not necessarily tied to rank or position, and that lesson has been confirmed in my post-Army life. Sometimes, the most effective leader of a group is not the nominal leader. Moreover, in the Army and the military in general, excellent leaders exist in units as small as a team or a platoon. Some few ascend to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, where they help lead the Nation by advising the president on matters military. Others serve in cabinet-level leadership positions following their military careers.

The same traits that characterize excellent military leaders apply in civilian life. Many veterans, of both the

and so does integrity. Business, politics, the medical and legal professions, and nonprofit agencies across the United States have benefited from the leadership of former service members.

The past two decades have reminded us from time to time that military leaders are human beings. They are vulnerable to the same weaknesses and temptations that have afflicted humanity throughout history. We see the headlines trumpeting the ignominious fall of a respected general officer. In the past twenty years, more than one high-ranking military officer has acknowledged or been convicted of offenses ranging from the vague "conduct unbecoming an officer" to serious crimes of fraud, bribery, sexual assault, bigamy, and adultery (a chargeable offense under the Uniform Code of Military Justice).

In a military community, the failings of even a little-known leader can make it to the front pages of the local newspaper. Occasionally, local news becomes national news. My initial reaction is disappointment that a seemingly proven leader has misplaced his moral compass and lost his way. Then, I find myself sympathizing with that leader's family, who are exposed to as much scrutiny and criticism as the offender. However, since I am far from perfect myself, I avoid being judgmental.

Nonetheless, I realize that grievous errors in a leader's judgment are as corrosive to trust as acid to iron. People will not support a leader they do not trust. They can doubt, disagree with, or strongly disagree with a leader; they can even dislike a leader, but if people trust the leader to do the right thing in any circumstance—even at a high personal price—people will follow.



Retired Army Gen. Colin Powell once recounted a lesson he had learned long ago from a sergeant at Fort Benning's Infantry School: "You know you're a good leader when people follow you [even if only] out of curiosity."<sup>1</sup> Powell, who retired from the Army in 1993, is a leader I admire. If he makes a mistake, he acknowledges it. He has effectively displayed integrity through his military career



and into government service and the for-profit and nonprofit worlds, so people trust him.

Trustworthiness is valuable not only to peers and subordinates but also to those whom leaders serve; this principle applies to military leaders in particular. Everyone who ranks below, above, or equal to a leader must trust the leader's integrity. For example, any president would want to know that his or her military advisers were "speaking truth to power" instead of merely mouthing perceived political correctness. Any battalion commander or platoon leader would need to trust the integrity of other same-level leaders. Honoring one's oaths matters, whether testifying in a courtroom or leading soldiers onto a battlefield.

I have observed and learned from many military and civilian leaders. In the years since my husband retired, my career in the civilian world has taken me from newsrooms to boardrooms and from management positions to community volunteer posts. I have served on the local school board and as chairperson of the library board of trustees. I say this not to tout my leadership credentials but to frame my perspective. Most leaders I observed did the right thing regardless of personal cost. That is integrity. That is what makes a leader trustworthy.

Retired Gen. Colin Powell addresses leaders from all components at the first Army Profession Annual Symposium 30 July 2014 at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Mikki L. Sprenkle, U.S. Army)

A few military leaders—or perhaps several—in the past two decades have disappointed their forces, the American public, and their own personal aspirations by committing headline-grabbing transgressions. Their falls from grace provide cautionary tales—for better or worse, they are role models. Some observers merely learn not to get caught doing something wrong. The majority learn a more difficult lesson—not to do something they know is wrong. Those who succumb to flattery, avarice, greed, or lust are regrettable aberrations. Measured against the thousands who have lived up to their various oaths in serving, there is no comparison.

Most military leaders are honorable people who can be trusted to adhere to their oaths, the law, and the standards of ethical conduct. They can be trusted with the lives of soldiers and the defense of freedom. They quietly go about fulfilling their duties in one of the most demanding and dangerous professions in the





world. They tend to their soldiers, their families, and their own integrity. Their names do not appear often in the headlines, but you will find many of them listed in the currently serving, killed in action, wounded, or retired rolls. Here in North Carolina, many can be found in the pages of the local telephone directory.

As the decades continue to roll by, each era will see service members ascend to leadership. No matter their personality or their personal style, the memorable leaders—the ones who inspire a few service members or an entire nation—will be the ones whose effectiveness rests on their integrity. They will be the

Spc. Ryan Grant and Spc. Jeffrey Morrero with the 65th Military Police Company bag toys for Sgt. 1st Class Catherine Reese and Staff Sgt. Jessica Taylor, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne), 2 December 2015, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The toys were donated for the 18th Annual Randy Oler Memorial Operation Toy Drop at Fort Bragg and were subsequently distributed to children in need throughout the region. Events such as the toy drop keep soldiers and leaders at Fort Bragg well integrated into the surrounding civilian communities. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Joseph Bicchieri, U.S. Army)

leaders who always do the right thing for their soldiers, their families, and their own legacy. ■

## Note

1. Colin Powell, "View from the Top" lecture series (speech, Stanford University Black Business Students Association and the Graduate School of Business, Stanford, CA, 16 November 2005).