n the fall of 1989 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, I was a patrol leader returning from a night reconnaissance patrol when I went to the platoon command post to submit my patrol report. When I arrived, my platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Larry Johnson, was manning the radios, both the company network and the fires network, and was the only person awake at the position. He motioned me down, placed a finger to his lips (for me to be quiet) and asked for the report. I gave him the report and he said that he would let the platoon leader know what I reported when he woke up later.

“Sgt. Johnson, have you had any rest yet?” I asked. “Nah, I’ll wake the platoon leader in a little while and rack out then,” he said. “They (the platoon leader, radio operator, fire support specialist and medic) need the sleep more than I do. Besides, I’m used to this.”

He smiled and waved me off to also get some sleep. As I walked back to my position off the perimeter, I thought about how our grizzled platoon sergeant was always taking care of us and hoped, when it was my turn, I would do so as well.

Each and every noncommissioned officer who sustains the Army of this nation takes an oath. With the swearing of that oath, you enter into a sacred agreement to support the nation. They support the nation, your leaders and your subordinates, through your service. This is reconfirmed in the Soldiers’ Creed, which says, “I will serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.” Through these acts you have chosen to

The NCO
Army Leader, Servant Leader

By retired U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Cameron Wesson
Special to the NCO Journal
Servant leaders are modeled and guided by seven characteristics that contribute to their personality. They exhibit and practice the following qualities: agape love, humility, altruism, trust, vision, empowerment and service. These guiding areas are directed toward their followers, who are the servant leader’s primary concern. The foundation of this model is agape love, which can be translated to simply doing the right thing.

In the recently published book, ‘From One Leader to Another,’ from the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, doing the right thing is a common message. The book is a collection of observations and insights from Army leaders who are themselves servant leaders. With their messages, these servant leaders are growing and inspiring the next generation of NCOs.

Within the Army, servant leaders are observed practicing servant leadership every day. While the mission and job come first, the Soldiers are taken care of always. This includes all Soldiers, both subordinate and senior. Army leaders eat only after their Soldiers eat and are expected to share the hardships of their subordinates. Leading by example ensures that leaders care for their subordinates first, before themselves. Doing so allows them to understand the challenges, hardships and limitations. Their subordinates, in turn, observe and emulate the actions of their servant leaders and they begin leading by example themselves.

Proof of servant leadership principles are exemplified in the words of the NCO Creed. The creed states: “I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit or personal safety…. Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine…. I know my Soldiers, and I will always place their needs above my own.” In fact, the whole NCO Creed, along with the Soldiers’ Creed, is a testament to servant leadership.

Servant leadership and the servant leader are powerful sources of inspiration in our Army today, and examples can be seen throughout time. Servant leaders, having chosen to be servants first, have in them the
capacity for caring and providing for others—subordinate or senior. The servant leader feels a responsibility to do this and does not serve seeking reward. The servant leader cares for all and attempts to bring them to a level that inspires them to also become servant leaders.

Observations and experiences from my 30 years of service (27 years as a leader) have shown me that good leaders, are good followers, or servants, first. Along the way, they perfected the skills of the Army profession and learned to care for Soldiers. Eventually, they embrace the philosophy of servant leadership themselves and became servant leaders.

Soldiers can sense when their leaders genuinely care about them and this builds trust. This trust forges a bond between all and solidifies the team. That bond is all-encompassing. Soldiers know the leader genuinely cares about their needs and the leader trusts that the Soldiers will do what is required to complete the task and get the mission accomplished.

Cameron Wesson is a retired first sergeant with more than 21 years of active duty experience with extensive leadership assignments in the infantry and logistics career fields. He has had numerous overseas deployments that include Central America, Korea, Europe, the Balkans and Iraq. He is currently a Department of the Army civilian and serves as the deputy director for the U.S. Army Information Operations Proponent, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

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