



U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. James Porterfield, left, command senior enlisted leader for North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command, discusses Operation Allies Refuge with U.S. Army North Command Sgt. Maj. Phil Barretto during a visit to Task Force McCoy at Ft. McCoy, Wisconsin, Aug. 25, 2021. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Zach Mott)

Developing Great Leadership

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****Originally published in the October 2009 edition of the *NCO Journal***

Leadership is a word often used in the United States military. The acronym, *LDRSHIP*, represents the Army's seven values, which we must use and apply to call ourselves Soldiers. We develop into leaders throughout our careers. We recruit, train and appoint new leaders. We plan and carry out operations under the direction of our command and staff leaders. But, how does one define and become a great leader?

A great leader is someone who helps others do and become more than they ever thought possible. Developing great leadership is about unlocking potential. It is not about telling people what to do, but inspiring them to achieve and

lead by example. The quality of leadership makes the difference between a team that is passionate about what it's doing versus one that is simply following orders.

Good leadership isn't hard to achieve, but a truly great leader stands out above all other leaders. A great leader does not make false assumptions, is understanding and humble, and accepts that there's always room for improvement.

To be a great leader, one must be an effective leader. An effective leader can make things happen the right way. When something is wrong, they will solve the problem in a timely manner instead of letting it continue unresolved,

making a situation more complex.

But there are many factors that can stand in the way of becoming an effective leader. One of the most dangerous misconceptions about leadership is thinking that a leader knows it all. Another is the idea that an efficient leader is also effective, which is absolutely incorrect.

My mentor once told me: *“The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership. One should never yield to temptation and sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency.”*

An effective leader must keep in mind that human frailty comes into play whether you are a private or a command sergeant major. So while the ultimate decision and responsibility may lie with one individual, it is incumbent upon that individual to gather information and trust others’ points of view before developing a plan of action.

Great leaders also must be open to change. A leader should not think that their way is the only way to accomplish goals. As Napoleon stated, *“There are no bad regiments; there are only bad colonels.”* Especially when working with team building, a leader must be able to take advice and appropriate criticism to better the way a mission will operate and get it accomplished.

Some people have only one style of leadership. But they must be willing to change as their leadership style may not always work.

Flexible leadership can be difficult; however, it is great because it involves being able to adapt according to the situation and the status of the team. An example is taking charge when a team is forming, but playing the role of coach when a team is managing itself well. It takes knowing which battles to fight, and which to let pass. It allows room for error and opportunity to make corrections and solve problems. Another aspect of flexibility is being creative and thinking of new ways to approach problems or situations. However, in saying that, we must

remember to present our personal ideas to our subordinates and superiors before applying them in order to win the fundamental support of our team.

When doing this, the idea will often be viewed as a positive change.

Author John Maxwell says this: *“The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails.”*

If we keep this in mind, it will help us develop into flexible leaders, which will bring us that much closer to great leadership.

There are many qualities that people will notice about future great leaders, including the ability to listen. Potential leaders of greatness have a “holding court” quality about them. When they speak, people listen. Some people talk a great deal – they give a speech – but nobody listens.

Leaders must have a great amount of mental toughness without acting “mean” and understand that no one can lead without being criticized. Most people would prefer a tough-minded leader who will work for the benefit of the team and is a positive influence on the team.

Leadership creates a certain separation from one’s peers. The distance comes because leaders carry major responsibilities, often the weight of an entire organization. A potentially *great* leader must recognize this pressure is normal and not be afraid to seek out developmental counseling from their mentors.

To be a *great* leader, period, a person must have a leader’s spirit, which consists of

the drive, willingness and motivation to lead. After all, becoming an effective leader takes hard work. If you’re not prepared to work hard at developing your leadership skills, or if you’re not sure you want to lead, you’ll struggle to be effective. People who struggle with this may feel depressed, and perhaps lose sight of their personal goals and their team’s goals.

There must be a sense of purpose.

As stated by Gen. Creighton Abrams, *“There must be a willingness to march a little farther, to carry a heavier load,*



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Edwards was wounded by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in 2008. He then chose to remain in the Army to lead and train a new generation of Soldiers. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

to step out into the dark and the unknown for the safety and well-being of others.”

This statement illustrates that leaders must show spirit, even in times of doubt.

A great leader must maintain that sense of purpose in the face of adversity and setback. Your position, whether as a commissioned or noncommissioned officer, is not a precursor or a barrier to the appropriate development and expression of vision. In the military, rank is often viewed from a socialist’s perspective by newer Soldiers. They cannot step up to the challenge and lead. In other cases, they are intimidated by superiors and are afraid to reach out and seek guidance and mentorship to develop their leadership vision.

A great leader has the ability to motivate, to inspire, to boost the morale of others. When subordinates feel this motivation, they, too, will demonstrate strength. We rely on these characteristics so immensely that absence of these skills can cause a devastating drop in confidence in subordinates. In turn, they will no longer trust their leaders.

John Quincy Adams said, *“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”*

The ability to motivate is an essential tool for all leaders to have in their toolbox. A good leader with a positive attitude and a vision can motivate anyone – even those who may feel dissatisfied with their jobs. Subordinates must be included in all parts of the process, every step of the way. Teamwork is the key here, not hierarchy, especially when “One Team, One Fight” was once the Army motto. Now, however, our motto signifies that there is strength in teamwork: “Army Strong.” That said, people must still be treated as individuals. Always acknowledge their importance and show them respect. They’re people first, Soldiers second. Superior work must be encouraged, recognized and rewarded. Leaders must motivate and boost the pride and morale of their section.

A great leader will have an outstanding ability to communicate, which is imperative if the mission is to be completed successfully. Effective communication will greatly speed up the progress of the tasks at hand. Speaking and writing are certainly important, but perhaps a more important element of communication is the ability to listen. We all know what it is like to have a conversation with someone who is not listening. The next time you engage in a conversation, truly make an effort to listen. You’ll find yourself enjoying and learning from the people with whom you associate. Not only does this show your concern for others, but it also shows compassion and understanding.

Leaders must lead by example. All of us have had a role model, someone we’ve admired, and someone who has influenced us by their actions, ethical standards, ideals or achievements. We cannot make someone fear

us and then expect to have their loyalty.

Gen. Dwight Eisenhower said, *“I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him, he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.”*

As Soldiers, we may tend to forget the influence we have on those with whom we live and work. We tend to think only leaders are influential. But all of us, intentionally or not, constantly project our personal vision – the way we think life should be lived, our code of personal conduct – to everyone we meet.

Our conduct in the work environment surrounds us like the air we breathe. Almost subconsciously, we absorb the examples of others. We’re influenced, changed in some way. The changes may be small – almost unnoticeable – but over the course of time, the effects may be far reaching and profound. We’re different people because of what we see; we’ve changed others by what we do.

Great leadership is set by example and is straight forward. We don’t need to advertise ourselves as great leaders or ask others to do so. Leaders are subject to constant scrutiny. We hope and expect they will maintain high standards and diligence of their position. But, being human, we are also imperfect.

Gen. Omar Bradley stated, *“Leadership in a democratic army means firmness, not harshness; understanding, not weakness; generosity, not selfishness; pride, not egotism.”*

We must support our superiors and encourage them to support us.

Quite often; however, the demands of leadership bring out the very best in us. Arriving at a new duty station, we attempt to forecast what can and cannot achieve. But, settling in, we see the desire of the troops to excel, to perform the mission proudly and we’re encouraged to match that desire with increased commitment. This is what makes leaders and units perform beyond their perceived limitations, beyond what they thought themselves capable.

A great leader will be continually decisive. How often do we hear people say, “I wish they would just make a choice, any choice!” There are very few sources of irritation more frustrating to subordinates than the indecisive leader, one who cannot efficiently lay out a rational and logical course of action. Perhaps equally frustrating are leaders who keep changing their decisions or go back on their word, reflecting the most recently applied pressure or criticism of their previous decisions.

We must not be afraid of ridicule, nor must we fear making an error and being replaced.

Gen. Omar Bradley said, *“Leadership is intangible, and therefore no weapon ever designed can replace it.”*

Great leadership is needed on and off the battlefield. It rests in our hands to carry onward the finest of our military traditions and be an example of a great leader to the Soldiers of the past, the present and the future. ■

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