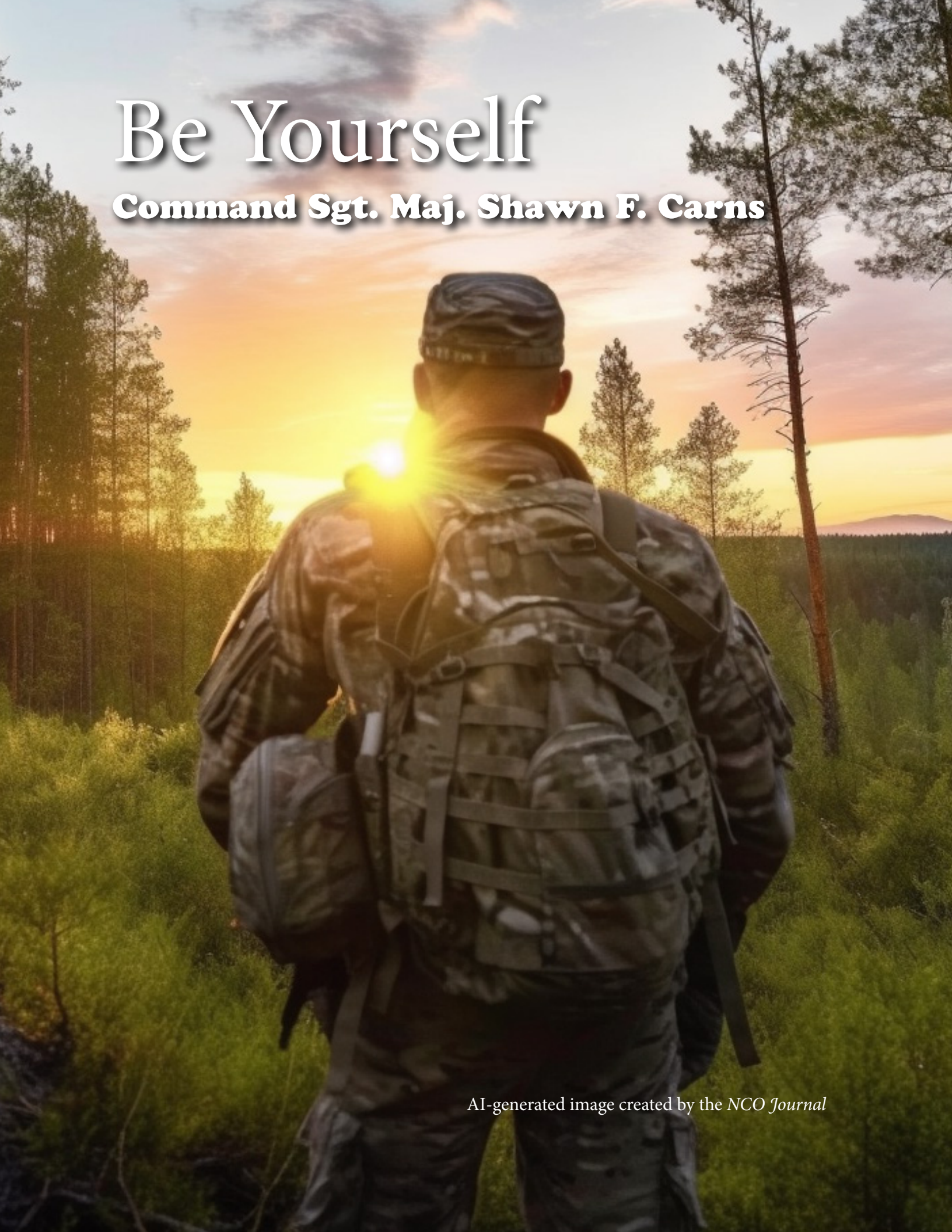


Be Yourself

Command Sgt. Maj. Shawn F. Carns



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Always be yourself, express yourself, and have faith in yourself; do not look for a successful personality and duplicate it.

Throughout my military career, I have molded my leadership style through different schools, experiences and reading books. All along the way I always heard the same two words from Senior Leaders, “Be Yourself.” What do these two words mean? How can I be myself as a leader with so many different influencers around us in our daily life?

We often find ourselves acting as someone else would and not as our true selves, often leading to a perceived or actual lack of caring, understanding and empathy. This heartless mindset stems from not knowing the “why,” not using common sense and not thinking critically for us. This often leads to others making decisions. This monotonous mindset must stop. It is time to read, self-reflect and indeed, “BE YOURSELF”.

Being yourself as a leader is essential for establishing trust, building strong relationships and gaining respect. I didn’t understand what it meant to “be yourself” because when I look back on my more than 24 years of leadership, it is clear I had many influencers helping me mold my leadership style. I wasn’t truly myself as a leader, though. It took about 10 years of military service, five as a leader, to truly understand essential leadership traits and abilities such as care, authenticity, empathy, values, personal story and leading with the heart and mind to shape my individual leadership style.

Caring

Caring is essential to leadership because it builds stronger relationships, fosters trust and promotes a supportive and collaborative culture. When leaders show they care about their team members, it creates a sense of safety, security and belonging. Team members are more likely to feel valued and motivated to do their best work. Caring leaders take the time to understand

their team members' strengths, weaknesses and personal goals. They invest in personnel development, providing the support, resources and guidance needed to succeed. Leaders who prioritize caring also show empathy, compassion and kindness. Care like this exemplifies the behavior leaders want their team members to emulate. By leading with care, leaders help create a positive work environment, foster engagement and loyalty, and ultimately drive their team and organization’s success.

Authenticity

Authenticity is key, and being true to oneself can help a leader develop a unique and powerful leadership style. Leaders who are true to themselves are comfortable in their skin. They can more easily share their strengths, weaknesses, passions and priorities with their team members. To get there, open yourself up to the masses; it’s ok to show emotion. Don’t be afraid of who you are, be comfortable being you. Doing so promotes open and honest communication, fosters a culture of transparency and creates an environment where people feel free to be themselves. “Being yourself” as a leader means leading with confidence, integrity and compassion. You empower others to do the same, creating a culture that values each person's unique gifts and talents and encourages everyone to bring their best.

Empathy

Empathy is essential in leadership because it allows leaders to understand and relate to their team members’ feelings and perspectives. This ability enables leaders to create a supportive and collaborative work environment where everyone feels heard and valued. When leaders are empathetic, they are better able to respond to their team members’ needs, anticipate potential issues and provide more effective feedback and coaching. Empathy also fosters trust and respect. Engagement, productivity and loyalty increase as team members feel validated and understood. In summary, empathetic leaders can put themselves into other people's shoes, feel what they feel and connect with them on an emotional level.

Personal Values

A person's values play a crucial role in shaping their approach to leadership, and the Army values help focus you as a person and leader. For instance, a leader who values loyalty, duty and respect are likelier to create an environment where people feel safe to share their thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment. A leader's values also influence their decision-making process, as they make choices that align with their beliefs. Values such as integrity, accountability and compassion can lead to an ethical, respon-



"Selfless Service" is an Army Value and a form of strong leadership. (U.S. Army graphic by Ashley L. Keasler released in 2018)



Graphic composite of the author, Command Sgt. Maj. Shawn F. Carns, created by the *NCO Journal*.

sible and empathetic leadership style. Therefore, a person's values shape their leadership style subtly and significantly. Leaders must reflect on and understand their values to lead purposefully and ethically.

Life Story

Your life story also can significantly impact your leadership style, with experiences and challenges from your past shaping how individuals lead in the present and future. For example, my mom and dad divorced when I was young. My mom remarried, but we didn't have a lot of money. It wasn't easy; we had to be tough to survive. I understood empathy, but this experience is a big reason why it took me so long in my leadership journey to understand the word care.

Similarly, someone who has experienced discrimination or prejudice may be more inclined to advocate for equality and fairness. On the other hand, a life story can also negatively impact a person's leadership style, especially if they have not dealt with and processed past trauma or struggles. Such experiences can result in behavior patterns not conducive to effective leadership and may lead to team members feeling disrespected or unsupported. Therefore, understanding and reflecting on one's life story can help individuals learn how specific experiences have influenced their leadership style and help address areas for growth and self-improvement.

From the Heart

Speaking and acting from the heart is crucial for effective leadership because it reflects honesty, authenticity and integrity. When leaders speak and act from the heart, they can better connect with their team members on a deeper emotional level. This connection fosters trust and respect and connects the team personally, not just professionally.

It enables leaders to express their thoughts and feelings and demonstrates that they care about their team members' well-being and success. When leaders lead with their hearts, they inspire their team members to do the same, be their authentic selves and put their hearts into their work. This leads to greater job satisfaction and productivity. Speaking and acting from the heart makes leaders more relatable, trustworthy and effective. The result is loyal and engaged teams more likely to succeed.

Understanding the "why" behind your leadership style is critical to driving your team's engagement, motivation, and success. Simon Sinek writes a great book, "Start with Why." It helped me understand my why: to build relationships, serve and care for others, thus creating inspiration and trust in my team. Understanding my why formed the foundation of my leadership approach, which guided my decisions and interactions with others. When you understand your "why," you are better equipped to communicate a compelling vision to your team, set realistic goals and make decisions that align with your core values.

Staying Grounded

Finally, staying grounded is essential to a leader's effectiveness. A successful leader must remain centered and resilient in the face of change, setbacks and new challenges. Truly grounded leaders can maintain their focus and perspective even when the situation becomes stressful or chaotic, which enables them to lead with clarity and decisiveness. A grounded leader can also help their team stay calm and focused. The leader's grounding creates a sense of stability and predictability that engenders trust and confidence in the team. When leaders lose that footing, they risk making poor decisions that may have long-term repercussions.

Being grounded enables leaders to make thoughtful decisions based on values and priorities rather than reacting impulsively out of fear, uncertainty or anxiety. This critical grounding helps ensure leadership success, fosters an effective team and enables a leader to navigate complex situations with intelligence and grace.

Call to Action

You can get started right now! Now that you have had the time to read the article, you can begin journaling your understanding of the reading, self-reflect on your journal writings, develop a plan to "BE YOURSELF" and take action to implement it into your leadership style. ■

Command Sgt. Major Shawn F. Carns serves as command sergeant major for I Corps, Joint Base Lewis-McChord Washington. Prior to that, CSM Carns served as the command senior enlisted leader, Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa. He has served in every key leadership position in the infantry from team leader to command sergeant major.



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