



Liked leaders attain more substantial influence, gain more commitment, and create more positive working environments, resulting in passionate and thriving teams. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Changing the “Liker-ship” Mindset

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Many senior leaders wrongly proclaim that leadership is not about liker-ship, potentially misguiding or hindering new leadership growth. Leadership and liker-ship are synonymous with each other. Liked leaders attain more substantial influence, gain more commitment, and create more positive working environments, resulting in passionate and thriving teams.

Although some may disagree, liker-ship is key to building more productive teams. Modern leaders should strive to connect with their Soldiers to build trust and create cohesion, and being liked is an integral part of that. Leaders must understand the value of liker-ship and find ways to integrate its benefits by adopting five simple

leadership actions.

Referent Power

When people truly enjoy being around a leader, manager, or anyone, what makes that person likable and inspirational? Those feelings stem from an ability to instill referent power, which describes a person's respect, admiration, and *likability* to another. In other words, the power gained from interpersonal relationships.

Quinones-Gonzalez (2022) said referent power is “one of the strongest attributes of modern leaders” (p. 3). Teams will be more engaged in the mission and perform their best when leaders are liked, respected, and admired.

When leaders ultimately reflect on their careers in the Army, they will realize their best leaders had referent power. They enjoyed being around them and would work harder for them than any other leader. Regardless of their leader, people can still perform well. However, they will exceed expectations when working for someone they like.

Despite the constant reminders, some leaders overcome the misconception that leadership is not liker-ship and prioritize referent power. Some noncommissioned officers (NCOs) adopt referent power as a cornerstone of their leadership style, contributing significantly to career achievements.

If more leaders changed their mindset about this concept, NCOs would propel their teams to achieve more than ever expected. Before discussing ways to acquire likability, it is essential to examine the types of leadership power.

Types of Leadership Power

The two main categories of power include positional and personal. When assigned to positions of authority and responsibility (i.e., platoon sergeant), leaders automatically get positional power. With positional power, NCOs can recommend rewards and punishments, manage given information, and provide legitimate and ethical orders that Soldiers must follow.

Leaders earn and develop personal power over time by gaining trust, respect, and likability. With personal power, NCOs can influence people and teams with referent power and knowledge. Personal power debunks the “leadership is not liker-ship” mentality. Leaders’ ability to harness this type of power creates opportunities for more significant success than leaders who focus more on positional power.

The balance of both powers becomes the key to unlocking high performance. Leaders often know how to employ positional power precisely. However, how do leaders acquire the referent power needed to balance legitimate responsibilities while gaining substantial likability and influence?

Standards and Discipline

NCOs must remember they have positional power first. They must instill and uphold standards and fair and consistent discipline. “Great organizations are ones that exude and enforce standards and discipline much better than average organizations” (Williamson, 2020, para. 10).

NCOs will fail to lead effective teams when standards and discipline are not priorities, believing that this will create likability. Gaining liker-ship does not mean leaders should neglect rule enforcement and holding people accountable for their actions.



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mwangi John, 210th Aviation Regiment instructor, teaches Soldiers of the 222d Aviation Regiment how to conduct a SALUTE report at the Advanced Individual Training Field Training Exercise at Fort Eustis, Virginia, July 28, 2021. Leaders with immense personal power are experts in their field but communicating that they do not always have the answers proves they are human and gain more respect from others. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. George Prince)

Stand Up For and Take Care of People

Great leaders stand up for and care for their people. “With that feeling of support, those in the organization are more likely to put in extra effort that ultimately benefits the group as a whole” (Sinek, 2009, p. 104).

When standing up for someone, a natural psychological connection created at that moment immediately gives the leader respect, trust, and credibility. It is that feeling, and at that moment, where someone knows they would follow that person into any situation or do anything to return the favor.

The more leaders do it, the stronger that connection becomes and the higher people will perform. However, they must remain consistent and never break this trust. NCOs who stand up for people are perceived to care for them.

Empathy

Empathy enables leaders to be approachable and understand what someone is experiencing. NCOs should place themselves in another’s shoes before reacting to the situation. If someone is going through personal issues, then put yourself in their shoes and be there to help.

Contrary to the norm, this could mean stepping away from the daily grind for a few hours to engage in team-building activities.

Caring for people also includes finding ways to resolve their problems when they cannot. Suppose the issue is above their level of influence (i.e., personnel actions). In that case, leaders must intervene and make the situation a priority.

They must follow through on their word.

Never be the NCO who pretends to care about

an issue and neglects to make the necessary effort to help. Otherwise, trust erodes, and morale declines. No matter the mission, NCOs will not achieve it when their team thinks they have no interest in them as human beings. Always remember, the people NCOs lead will accomplish the mission; leaders are there to serve and empower them.

Be Genuine and Humble

Honesty and transparency about information, intentions, actions, and who the leader is builds trust and respect, and people expect this from NCOs. Also, be humble enough to openly admit to mistakes and about not knowing everything.

Leaders with immense personal power are experts in their field but admitting they don't always have the answer proves they're human and gains them more respect from others. Humility is an indicator of great leaders.

Nobody likes leaders who display sneaky behavior, hide their motives, and avoid taking blame. Being personable and genuine helps.

John C. Maxwell, an author of multiple leadership books, said, "People follow them because of who they are and what they represent" (Maxwell, 2016, para. 19). Remember, being personable doesn't mean leaders and subordinates are friends, it means they're developing strong professional relationships with their team, thus increasing referent power and likability.

Don't Add Stress

Leaders who add stress struggle to build positive working environments. Simon Sinek said, "Stress and anxiety at work have less to do with the work we do and more to do with weak management and leadership" (Innovatio, 2022, para. 22).

These leaders also create a no-fail environment and constantly look for things their subordinates do wrong. Also, this type of behavior typically leads to micromanagement, which also leads to losing liker-ship.

To avoid this, leaders must empower others, delegate responsibility and authority, and let people fail, all of which focus on personal and career growth. Additionally, they should refrain from making last-minute decisions that impede planned activities.

In specific career fields, being unpredictable creates unnecessary stress and lowers productivity. Predictable work schedules give people the energy to put forth maximum effort during the workday.

Furthermore, leaders should not send non-urgent after-work text messages and phone calls. They should allow their people to rejuvenate for the next day. Most information can wait until the next workday.

These types of reactive decisions can affect Soldiers' work-life balance and negatively impact the workplace. The team expects leaders to have passion for the mission without adding unnecessary stress to the process. Avoiding extra stress builds leaders' likability and influence and creates a working atmosphere where people want to be.

Communication is Critical

Leaders who strive for greater personal power must open the lines of communication, encourage ideas, and accept feedback. Also, NCOs should never be condescending, rude, or belittling. There is absolutely no reason for it. It perfectly opposes the mindset that leadership is liker-ship.

Leaders must be candid and assertive when appropriate. Building referent power should never come at the cost of not having tough conversations. Firm and professional discussions combined with an open mind help identify the root cause of poor performance during coaching and mentorship, for example.

How leaders navigate conversations and solutions determines people's commitment levels. Team collaboration and encouraging ideas through critical and creative thinking are vital for team trust and performance. Openly discussing innovative solutions to challenge the status quo builds loyalty and makes people feel valued and engaged. Show trust and faith in other people's ideas.

When leaders authentically believe in their team, the team will believe in them in return. Some leaders may ask for ideas, but they're only going through the



U.S. Army Reserve Best Squad competitors, Squad 1, representing 1st Mission Support Command, work together to navigate an obstacle during the Squad Leader Reaction Course at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, on Sept. 03, 2023. Good leaders show trust and faith in other people's ideas and by authentically believing in the team, the team will believe in them. (U.S. Army Reserve Photo by Staff Sgt. David Barrette)

motions; they never truly accept them. Those leaders fail to gain the influence necessary for others to want to follow them.

To gain liker-ship, one must strongly encourage and implement ideas even if they're better than their own ideas.

Lastly, leaders who accept positive and negative feedback open the door for self-improvement and create approachable and trustworthy environments, resulting in referent power. NCOs should never hesitate to listen to their team when they tell them how to improve as leaders. There is no better group of people to do that.

Conclusion

Although some may disagree, liker-ship is key to

building productive teams, and leaders develop it by understanding and adopting five simple leadership actions. These concepts are not secret, yet not all leaders fully understand or apply them.

Failed leadership comes from lack of understanding and shortage in referent power. Removing the "leadership is not liker-ship" mentality would drastically improve teams and organizations.

It is a fallacy undermining leader development and restricting teams' full potential. Great power and influence are derived from subordinates who like their leaders. The ill-advised assumption that leadership is not liker-ship caused this mindset to ravage the NCO Corps. It is time to change our mindset and become better leaders. ■

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