



For leaders to be effective, their subordinates must like them personally and professionally. Leaders should not waste time instilling fear in others, because the efficiency they desire directly relates to how well their organization respects them, not fears them. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

# Leadership vs. Likership – Why not Both?

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Class 74, Sergeants Major Course

**O**ld-school military thinking about interaction between higher-ups and subordinates goes like this: *It's about leadership, not likership*. That logic's flawed, especially if one's authority stems from personal rather than positional power. Military leaders should be liked.

## Inspire Respect, Not Fear

Gibson (2021) infers that likership is rooted in being authentic and personable with those you lead. The efficiency leaders desire directly relates to how well their organization respects them.

*Respects, not fears.*

Fear yields minimal results, just enough to avoid

bullying and harassment. Leaders should not waste time instilling it in others. If you berate people or talk down to them, you inspire animosity which will follow you for the rest of your career.

For leaders to be effective, their subordinates must like them personally and professionally. This relates to compliance versus commitment. As a leader, you want to inspire one, not just get the other.

## Seek Commitment, Not Compliance

Soldiers committed to a goal do everything possible to realize a vision, Isham (2021) asserts. Their effort stands in contrast to mere compliance, where Soldiers exert only the minimum effort to satisfy a leader.

Bearing this in mind, one can see how well-liked leaders gain commitment from subordinates, whereas other leaders only get people to do what they say.

However, leaders should not have beers with their subordinates every night or otherwise forge close personal relationships with them. Rather, subordinates should see their leaders as people, as individuals with values, ambitions, vision, and personality.

## Lead for Today's Army

Stoicism is not as needed in leaders as it once was or as useful in contemporary military life. Soldiers and leaders in today's Army need someone more relatable and personable than past leaders.

There will always be a place for the Gunnery Sgt. Thomas Highways of the world (from the movie *Heartbreak Ridge*) and maybe even for the likes of Capt. Herbert Sobel (as portrayed in the miniseries *Band of Brothers*).

However, although effective at getting results, these leaders did not have buy-in from either their command (Gunny Highway) or their subordinates (Capt. Sobel). Buy-in from others can be earned quickly if the leader is liked from above and below the chain of command.

Commanders in today's Army have a difficult task ahead of them. They must find ways to meet and relate to their Soldiers with the closeouts from the Global War on Terror, the fallout from political unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) have the difficult task of finding ways to meet their commander's intent while finding ways to motivate their subordinates.

Al-Baradie (2014) found that effective praise can inspire and motivate people to strive for success. Grant et al. (2010) also noted a correlation between giving compliments and the need for reciprocity in the person being praised.

Soldiers need more than occasional praise, however. They need to see their leaders as people with flaws, who can be vulnerable. They may require them to be open about struggles with things like alcohol, fitness, or personal and spiritual trials.

If you are a commander and your junior officers or NCOs are not comfortable enough to talk with you, why

is that? If you are a command sergeant major and people only talk to you when you tell them to see you or when you are chewing them out, why is that?

Frost (2024) infers that NCOs should not add to the stress Soldiers already feel. If you are a squad leader or platoon sergeant and people leave the room when you enter, or you don't find out about their problems until they become your problems, why is that? Are they the problem, or is it the vibe you put out? Do others not trust, like, or respect you enough to talk to you?

Seeking subordinates' approval should never be a true leader's primary goal. However, it will not go unnoticed if you do not even attempt to show some humanity.

As Webster (2018) found, being liked is a fundamental component of leadership the military should capitalize on.

## Put People First

Leaders do not have to be abrasive, condescending, or angry all the time to get things done. Most Army personnel would benefit from building a community of trust and, for lack of a better term, *family*. This thinking is far from how the country's general population views the military.

A people-first agenda means being more in tune with those working

with, beneath, and above one's position – and doing what is needed to help them accomplish the mission (McConville, 2019). Avoid just being a boss. Be the leader to whom people can relate.

There are many ways leaders can be liked personally and respected professionally by their seniors and subordinates simultaneously. As former Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston's *This Is My Squad* initiative discussed, getting to know your people by checking in on them, asking about personal issues, and following up with them are some of the keys to success for all leaders (Rempfer, 2019).

For instance, meeting your personnel at their level might involve:

- Attending their functions as a person, not as a leader.
- Participating in events with them (such as sports and physical fitness).
- Having them over during the holidays.



U.S. Army Reserve 1st Lt. Jordan Littel and Sgt. Collin George from the 432nd Civil Affairs Battalion share a laugh at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center near Hohenfels, Germany, Sept. 13, 2023. In modern military life, Soldiers benefit from having relatable, personable leaders. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Spc. Veronica Hamilton)

Offer help, guidance, or mentorship graciously and do not expect anything in return. Show you care by giving unanticipated time off (with your commander consent). Consider their life events and allow for time off, even if they do not request or want it. There are countless ways to reach them at their level, with ingenuity and foresight.

## Conclusion

Leaders can be both liked and respected. Leadership and likership are not mutually exclusive. They can coexist.

Finding ways to meet your people at their level is a great way to lead and show you care. Understanding yourself and being humble enough to know a problem might be internal (you) and not external (them) is a sign of a true leader.

Be the leader you needed when you were going up through the ranks, not the one Hollywood or society says you should be. The ability to get your subordinates' commitment should be the goal, not just getting them to do what you say.

Being liked by your seniors, peers, and subordinates is not bad, and the Army should stop acting like it is. It might be the one thing that gets your people to put in more effort. ■



Command Sgt. Maj. Raymond S. Harris, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command sergeant major, talks to junior enlisted Soldiers at a dining facility in Poznan, Poland, Jan. 31, 2022. Getting to know your people by checking in on them, asking about personal issues, and following up with them is key to the success for all leaders. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Agustín Montañez)

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