

TRUST AND THE LEADER-LED RELATIONSHIP

by

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INTRODUCTION

Distinguished Guests, Participants in JSCOPE IV, the first order of business, for me, is to commend you for conducting this event--to seek answers on ethical issues in the military profession. You should be commended, because our social climate today is in need of some repair--and the study of ethics, and an examination of our professional value set, are methods we can apply to the job at hand.

Such study is crucial to the proper exercise of every profession - but particularly the military profession, for we in the military must remain a bit of Sparta in the midst of today's Babylon. I did not invent that phrase, but I wish I had. I borrowed it from Samuel Huntington, Harvard Professor, who used it in a book on the military, written several years ago. I think it expresses well our calling (our duty) -- the responsibility we have, as professional military men and women, to guard not only our nation, but to keep its traditional values as well.

The subject I want to explore is trust, more exactly, trust and the leader-led relationship. In examining this subject, I want to focus on dimensions which substantiate the ethical basis of trust between the leader and those he leads.

My guidance was about 25 minutes; but the issue is worth a 2-hour address, at least. So, it is important that what's said in 25 minutes, be said with specificity. Thus, I've prepared some remarks - to assure the desired precision in what I want to say.

The binding dimensions of trust in the leader-led relationship provide the structure for my presentation. These dimensions are:

1. Judgment
2. Loyalty
3. Involvement
4. Communication
5. Competence
6. Responsibility

This list identifies six binding dimensions, factors if you will, that cement trust between the leader and those he leads--at any level. You'll note that,

as these dimensions are developed, and we measure them for proper fit, I'll relate them to the principles of leadership found in Army Field Manual 22-100, Military Leadership. I do this as a reminder, that those principles are fundamental truths for any discussion or characterization of leadership. And moreover, they're applied axioms. They can be used everyday, by leaders in all services.

JUDGMENT

Judgment is a dimension of trust between leader and led that's often overlooked in favor of more grandiloquent qualities. Judgment derives from experience and expertise. It's forged out of the decision making process. One learns it by deciding on real issues, when faced with real consequences.

I once read that the core of leadership is the ability, and the willingness, to exercise judgment. Notice the two parts--ability and willingness. Many have the ability to exercise judgment--the intellect and the experience. But they do not become true leaders, worthy of the trust of those they lead, until they demonstrate good judgment by a willingness to exercise it.

As an example, let me cite the bureaucrat. For many, this is a pejorative term, and I'll use it that way. We have bureaucrats in every service, posing as leaders at all levels. The bureaucrat desires orders which are carefully written in detail so he can avoid exercising judgment. He shuns initiative, he evades responsibility.

The trustworthy leader, on the other hand, seeks to exercise initiative, uses his imagination, and follows no fixed method. This is particularly true, both in dealing with military persons, and in dealing with military situations. Our Chief, General Meyer, once remarked that leaders cannot, indeed must not, blind themselves to any one answer, or any one methodology. They must discover, he said, the method best suited to motivate and employ each soldier.

Thus, the factor of judgment finds its definition in the principles of leadership, specifically,

-Make sound and timely decisions;

-And employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.

J.F.C. Fuller in his dissertation, Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure, remarked that the object of regulations and rules is to produce order in the fighting machine, and not to strangle the mind of the man who controls it.

One of my battalion commanders, not long ago, made a very cogent comment about judgment in leadership. He said that one of his biggest jobs was to act as a buffer for his company commanders. He was constantly exercising judgment about what guidance to pass on from above, and how to articulate it. If he was no more than a straight conduit to subordinates, then many of the directions from above would tend to disrupt the company, distort priorities, and create apprehension in younger leaders. He had to act as a filter and a

valve on that conduit. To be sure, he carries out orders, and his unit responds to guidance from above; but he has to be flexible, and to feel free to make judgments, at his level, on how best to activate his subordinates to get the job done. That's a superb commander. And you can be sure he has the trust of his subordinates.

One last comment about judgment. We should not let leaders get caught in the trap of thinking they don't have to explain their actions to subordinates. It's important that they do, that they want to, and that they understand its value. If in nonstress, or noncombat situations, a leader will explain the "why" of his actions and orders when issuing them, he builds confidence in his subordinates that his actions and orders are based on good reasoning. Trust is enhanced, so that in stress situations, when there isn't time to explain, subordinates will respond better because of past confidence in the judgment of the leader, engendered by his explanations.

LOYALTY

Next, let us look at the factor of Loyalty. The essence of loyalty between leader and led, is embodied in the leadership principle which says, "Know your men and look out for their welfare." General Maxwell Taylor once made a very sage comment about that. He said, "A reflective reading of history will show that no man ever rose to military greatness, who could not convince his troops that he put them first."

The concept of loyalty places a profound responsibility on the shoulders of the leader, for loyal soldiers believe in their leader. They believe in what he stands for. They'll tend to admire and support his value set. General Charles P. Summerall, one of the army's past great leaders, once said, "Men think as their leaders think." This prosaic sword can be double edged; --because there's also an old Chinese Proverb that says--"A fish begins to rot at the head." Thus, leaders must be careful to represent a decent set of values--an honorable code, if you will. This opportunity can become a powerful catalyst for achieving individual and team improvement, for helping soldiers reach beyond themselves. Inner qualities expressed and demonstrated by the leader, become the very basis of transformational leadership. Those who are led, then begin to say, "I want to be like that sergeant, or that lieutenant, or that captain."

In today's world, values and loyalties have become distorted. That's why leadership of young men, today, has become more difficult, harder than when I was a lieutenant. Peter Drucker, in his book, Managing in Turbulent Times, talks about the emerging person whose loyalty is to skills, not to the organization. This trend, in the military, would be a dangerous condition. Moreover, it can be exacerbated in a volunteer system, which to be competitive in the personnel market place, must encourage and emphasize the importance of learning a skill. Synergism in a team, section, or platoon derives, not from the collection of individual skills, but the teamwork, cohesion, and esprit which grows, in part, out of loyalty--a commitment to more than self.

The loyal commander will be tolerant of honest mistakes made by his subordinates while trying to get the job done. We must seek the innovative and aggressive young leader, who's willing to take his guts in his hands, to step out and get the job done. If young subordinates are afraid they'll be hurt professionally by doing something innovative and beyond average expectations, then they'll never reach beyond themselves. But if they're aggressive and innovative, they'll make mistakes periodically. Loyal commanders must understand and be tolerant of that - must encourage their subordinates to take worthwhile calculated risks. That's what wins battles. That's what creates exceptional units.

We must not create a leadership environment in our commands based on fear. Leaders who wake up every morning wondering if that is the day they will be relieved, very quickly become paranoid. Such leaders create paranoid units. And a paranoid unit is a dangerous and dying unit. Someone once said, that no man is a leader, until his appointment is ratified in the minds and hearts of his men. Leaders will not vote themselves into the esteem of their men. The true loyalty of those men will have to be earned by the leader, through exemplary leadership and reciprocal loyalty. The allegiance of our service members is not issued to us with the badge of rank. For the use of rank alone constitutes leadership through position or fear. That kind of leadership will not carry us beyond the edge of the parade field.

INVOLVEMENT

I want to say a word about involvement in the leader-led relationship. Leadership is a very emotional job. The good leader must throw his whole being into it - 30 hours a day, 8 days a week. It's that brand of leadership in which involvement must be operative, if one is to sustain two important principles:

- Train your men as a team;
- And insure that the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.

Train your men as a team. I find it hard sometimes to get younger leaders to think about teamwork and to influence it. There's no field manual on teamwork. We have all kinds of documents, pamphlets, circulars and the like on how to fight, how to maintain, and how to administer. But I've never seen a manual devoted to teamwork. Its success is directly proportional to the imagination and innovation of good leaders. I tell my leaders that war is a team sport; so we must focus on all those unit activities that build teamwork at the lowest level.

Insure that the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished. Before and after every major tank gunnery program in my division, I require my battalion commanders to brief me, respectively, on their preparatory program in detail and then on the lessons learned for improvement during the next cycle. Each month, during the division force readiness conference I require my battalion commanders to brief me, in detail, on their maintenance posture, to include:

vehicle status, parts supply status, vehicle services, maintenance management indicators and status of mechanics. Quarterly, battalion commanders brief me on their training accomplishments for the previous quarter measured against their program; and then, on the next quarter's training plan.

Some might suggest that this method consumes a great deal of my time as a division commander, and wonder at its efficacy. My response is that such briefings, given to the division commander, insure that commanders get involved in their training and maintenance, for they don't want to be caught short in front of the boss. The commander must become totally familiar with his unit and must become steeped in the issues to carry off the briefing. The payoff in such involvement is more informed leadership, commanders who teach their subordinates, and stronger unit performance.

In a recent article, I read that the first commandment of leadership is "Love Thy Soldier." To obey this commandment, the leader must involve himself. He's not there just for the high visibility ribbon cuttings, the award ceremonies, live fire exercises, or when the general or the admiral is in the area. But he's there routinely, sharing the arduous stressful hardships, the onerous tasks performed on cold rainy days--in the maintenance bays, in the field and down range.

Such involvement by the leader must be habitual in peace so that it transfers to war. For the leader must be up front in the bullet zone. He cannot remain out of touch. Again, Fuller in his study on generalship, says: "The most rapid way to shell shock an army is to shell proof its generals, for once the heart of an army is severed from its head the result is paralysis." This is a cogent truth for all leaders, not just generals. Chain of command presence when the unit is together, operating as a team, is the single greatest organizational and emotional motivator I know. It signifies involved, concerned leadership; it enhances the leader-led relationship. In a word, it builds trust.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is another basic ingredient in the relationship between leader and led, and I want to examine briefly two modes of communication:

- Verbal communication,
- And communication by doing.

Among the principles of leadership we note two analogous dictums:

- Keep your men informed
- And set the example.

The trusted leader must be unequivocal in what he says to his subordinates. Clear, concise articulation of objectives and standards is crucial. Too often what appears to be poor performance on the part of a subordinate is really the result of confusion or misunderstanding as to what is expected or required.

We must remember that communication works in both directions. Leaders must be in the receive mode as often as on transmit. Leaders have to listen sincerely and act upon solicited ideas and requests from subordinates. They need to use brainstorming sessions with junior leaders and subordinates to offer a forum for ideas.

While communicating, patience in explanation is paramount. I spoke earlier about telling soldiers why. Today's youth, those who fill our services voluntarily, are of an inquiring mind. They come from a youth culture which questions authority about instructions and orders they don't understand. The leader, particularly the young leader, must therefore appreciate the fine line separating insubordination from inquiry and act with good judgment in dealing with each situation.

Where possible, soldiers have a right to know about actions affecting them. It contributes to motivation and understanding of the mission; and a better performance from the service member will be the result. The leader owes his men complete fairness in communication with them. I have always told leaders that they can be as tough as they have to be, and soldiers will accept tough discipline or unpleasant situations, as long as the leader is fair. The important factor here, however, is that the leader is not only fair; but that he is perceived as fair. If a soldier thinks he is being treated unfairly, the problem is there, whether it is a fact or not. Therefore, the leader must work as hard to create the perception by subordinates of fairness as he does to create the reality of fairness. Achieving that, he can be tough and demanding; and it will be accepted; and he will succeed.

I said that setting the example is a form of communication. It is communication by doing; and in this regard, leaders must abide by the concept of congruence. That is, the leader must be consistent in what he says is important, and how he behaves on that same issue. There is no quicker way to tear down confidence from those we lead, or destroy trust, than to talk about top priorities, and then act in ways to deny the importance of those priorities.

Remember also, if the leader is up front where he should be, highly visible, his men will tend to form a group mood that reflects his mood. If he grumbles, they grumble; if he is unenthusiastic, they will be unenthusiastic; if he is uptight, they will be uptight. They will wear the leader's character like a mantle--and that is an awesome responsibility.

A final word on setting the example comes from the Catechism for Soldiers dated 1699. "An army of hares led by a lion is better than an army of lions led by a hare."

COMPETENCE

Let us for a moment, dwell on the factor of competence in the leader-led relationship. This is embodied in the first two principles of leadership:

- Be technically and tactically proficient;
- Know yourself and seek self improvement.

At every level, leaders must demonstrate proficiency. Lack of competence breeds lack of confidence--both insufficient self-confidence and insufficient confidence from subordinates. Junior leaders must demonstrate technical proficiency. Very senior leaders must demonstrate managerial proficiency. All must be tactically proficient and adept at leading men. Men and women in the services are entitled to a leader who knows his job.

I remember, as a lieutenant commanding a cavalry troop (about 150 years ago), the requirement from our regimental commander that we have proficiency with all weapons in our troop, and a cavalry troop has many weapons. We had to fire at least sharpshooter in our individual weapon, qualify our tank as a tank commander, and be at least qualified in all crew served weapons. We had to demonstrate the capability to disassemble and assemble every weapon in our unit. Now this was time consuming and tough. But the payoff in our confidence, in the esteem and trust of our soldiers, was tremendous. And it made the job of command easier.

Within my division, my leadership problems among junior leaders, in the main, stem from a lack of confidence; because professionally, they're not up to speed--they don't know their job; they generally lack proficiency in performance-oriented tasks. To try to con a soldier into believing that they know something they really don't, is disastrous, because soldiers are uncanny in their ability to spot a phony leader. We have found it necessary to develop and conduct brief, but comprehensive, performance oriented classes at battalion level, or below, where younger leaders can ask questions, participate, learn, and not be embarrassed by initial lack of knowledge. With increased skill proficiency, confidence goes up, leadership greatly improves, and unit operations are enhanced. Junior leaders will not then lag back, but step out front where they belong. They will not then hide behind rank, but establish a mature leader-subordinate relationship, grounded on mutual trust.

RESPONSIBILITY

Finally, let us briefly examine the factor of responsibility in the leader-subordinate equation. The principles of leadership are very explicit on responsibility.

- First seek responsibility--and take responsibility for your actions;
- Then develop a sense of responsibility in your subordinates.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian, once said that, "Life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility." Leaders must believe that, if they intend to be positive and successful in leadership.

I want to discuss responsibility from two viewpoints: How it affects trust; and its relationship to authority.

First, failure to place responsibility can convey a lack of trust. Too many centralized tasks at higher levels may imply that the lower level commander lacks the ability to execute. Impressions are formed that there is less trust in the chain of command. As well, oversupervision and monitoring or checking on mission tasks prior to an adequate response time can indicate a lack of trust. Both these conditions can be overcome by the astute, involved leader who takes the time to communicate. Certainly, centralization may be necessary to husband resources, or because of a lack of expertise and personnel at lower levels--a situation, incidentally that many units in the Army face today, mine included. But a careful explanation of the reasons, and the assignment of tasks commensurate with capability, even under more central direction, can alleviate perceptions of lack of trust. And if an assigned task requires close supervision from on top, then phase the operation; and build in program reviews announced ahead, taking care to stay away from the area in between milestones. Such planning can help assuage concerns for oversupervision.

Finally, authority and responsibility must go hand-in-hand. An essay by Col. E. E. Johnston, entitled, Portrait of a Soldier is very specific on this point. Col Johnston opines that good control calls for an unbroken chain of command all the way down to squads, with each leader having his commensurate share of responsibility and authority. But more importantly, that responsibility must only be as great as the power to control events. Any other idea is contrary to justice and undermines morale. I believe this to be true, particularly at lower levels of leadership. And nowhere is the idea more violated than at those lower levels. Over the years, we've taken from the company certain administrative, supply and maintenance oriented personnel to be placed at battalion level. Yet some insist that the company commander is a manager, and responsibility is still placed on him out of proportion to his authority. We thus have overburdened the least professionally mature among our commanders. Company commanders are executors. Management belongs at the level where commanders have a staff. And, if need be, we should further burden the battalion staff, to allow the company commanders freedom to execute, and to deal directly, and more personally with soldiers.

CONCLUSION

I've used my allotted time embellishing briefly on those key dimensions which I believe define a positive and healthy command climate, one rooted in trust. I've tried to explain trust in the leader-led context, by constructing a linkage to the principles of leadership.

These dimensions certainly don't represent all those factors necessary to the growth of trust between leaders and subordinates. And just hearing and understanding will not suffice to achieve leadership viability. Each dimension, among others that leaders may personally favor, must be practiced in a manner suited to the unique leadership style each may best employ.

I enjoin all leaders to reaffirm belief in the principles of leadership that the Army promotes. They remain eternal truths for leaders. They should be referred to from time to time and reviewed with subordinate leaders as a practical guideline to effective command.

In closing, I want to recite the definition of a good commander, as expressed by a group of American soldiers who reached a consensus definition. "A good commander," they said, "is someone who can step on your shoes, and still leave a shine." Simple but eloquent and powerful testimony about leadership from those who are led.

As always, the soldier, who will lay his life on the line in combat, reaffirms his trust in the good leader: That leader who recognizes and sustains the dignity of his men; who stands with them in the arena, sweating and bloody, to share their triumphs and recover them from their failures; who motivates them to reach beyond themselves, to achieve personal and team victories never believed possible.