

On Leadership

Core leadership traits

by Philip A. Mullenix

It's a *fact* that each of you possess skills in your underlying MOS and as a leader in the Marine Corps. Because you are a Marine, whether active duty or retired, you've reached a level of success that others only dream of achieving. Therefore, this is not a condescending missive on how to *become* a success. You're already there.

What I offer are observations on lives well-spent as well as on opportunities lost. The perch from which I've made these observations is a little unorthodox. For almost four decades as a professional interrogator, military interrogation instructor, and lawyer, I've witnessed in others the full range of human behavior, from the best to the worst:

- Enormous achievement on one hand—full-blown failure on the other.
- Peace of mind and self-fulfillment on one hand—utter despair on the other.
- Well-earned respect—versus the most aberrant disregard toward others.
- The person of real substance who has the strength of character to watch the backs and raise the game of those around him—versus the self-promoting phony who tries to elevate himself by demeaning others.

What distinguishes one from the other? How does one rise to the occasion rather than fall by the wayside? How



Regardless of MOS, Marines possess experiences that teach valuable leadership lessons.
(Photo by LCpl Tojyea Matally.)

do leaders get to the figurative bow of the ship where you can cut your own wake through the waters of life rather than slide to the stern where others will decide your destiny and leave you awash in waves that could sweep you overboard? Here are a few observations which might enhance your “leadership quotient.”

Core Leadership Traits

- First and foremost is *self-reliance*. This is not to suggest that the weak or the dependent should be left to twist

in the wind. In fact, compassion is the responsibility of a strong leader when it comes to protecting those who are unable to fend for themselves. But “rugged individualism” is ingrained in our American cultural DNA, which, in turn, means that it's tightly wound into the double helix of American leadership.

What do I mean by self-reliance? One must rely upon one's self—it's a philosophy of self-motivation and initiative that relies upon nobody else to “get it done.” In short, take the bull by the horns to shape your destiny because no one else should be expected to do it for you.

So one might reasonably ask how such a singularly individual trait plays into effective team building and group productivity. Consistently, I've observed respected leaders manifest self-reliance as a personal trait, and they put it on display for others to see, to feel, to learn from, and maybe even to fear. In so

>Mr. Mullenix has provided instruction in the Reid Technique of interviewing and interrogation to U.S. counterintelligence agents, military intelligence agents, special forces, and human intelligence collectors since 1978. He's also an attorney licensed by the State of Illinois, the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, and the United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

The information and opinions expressed herein are based upon the author's independent research and personal experiences.

doing, they effectively inspire, teach, or otherwise mandate that their team members adopt that very same boot-strap mentality of taking individual responsibility for the success of the group.

In your own leadership roles, what does that mean? Here's an example. Take a group project with maybe six people, including yourself, assigned to distinct, yet interdependent, tasks. All six of you are highly talented—smart, creative, and accomplished. But since this project is not exactly in your wheelhouse, you all think that nobody is going to expect perfection. Given their inherent talent, though, your teammates feel like they can nail together a decent performance without much effort. So what happens? The project slides a little, and then it begins to slide a lot. You're a part of this team, but you see your teammates sharing some laughs, maybe getting together for a strategy session, pitching some ideas that everybody likes. Great rapport, but nobody is bearing down on the structure or details that will make this project actually work. You see it coming; the end product is going to be mediocre at best, and someone is going to be embarrassed. What do you do?

The case I just described was a military training exercise, and here's what I saw.

I saw it in the leader's attitude and in his actions. He didn't wait for the group; instead, he took control of his *individual* elements and ran them to perfection, all while letting the others see he was carrying them. He called out his teammates on it—without letting it get personal—and he made it clear he wouldn't do their work for them. The others grumbled, but they kicked it into gear. Why? Because they knew that that one guy would hold up his end, and they didn't want to be left in the dust, looking foolish or incompetent.

Afterward, there was a lot of pride, as they had achieved their goals. At the same time, they knew they had been motivated by their leader's self-reliant attitude to exceed their own perceived limitations within a skill set that—up to that point—was both unfamiliar to

them and more than a little intimidating.

So what's the after-action report here? Self-reliance is contagious. When a leadership pace is set through individual effort, each member of the group will adopt that same trait of rugged individualism, which leads to an "I gotta hold up my end" kind of attitude. The end result is a chain without any weak links and a group that can be relied upon to deliver whenever challenged.

True leadership will acknowledge failure and will unabashedly dig into its root cause ...

- Second, there are *no excuses for failure*. There may be legitimate *explanations* for failure, but there are never any *excuses*.

True leadership will acknowledge failure and unabashedly dig into its root cause in any situation. Why? To find an explanation—not only so it doesn't happen again but also to learn how to "up one's game"—to improve the likelihood of future success. As a Marine, you're no stranger to the notion that it takes guts to get up after being knocked down. It's a hard dose of reality to assess, accept, and remedy the reasons why one was knocked down in the first place.

This is in stark contrast to the lame path of making excuses. Only the weak blame the economic times, their lack of good fortune, quirks of fate, or other circumstances as excuses for failure. The effective leader never allows his team to make excuses because that kind of bland acceptance does nothing more than send a message that it's okay to rationalize failure or—worse—to blame someone or something else for it.

Instead, those in effective leadership roles have no fear of failure. They embrace it, as it surely is a precursor to success. If you're not failing, then you're not trying hard enough to push the envelope or to reach the limits of

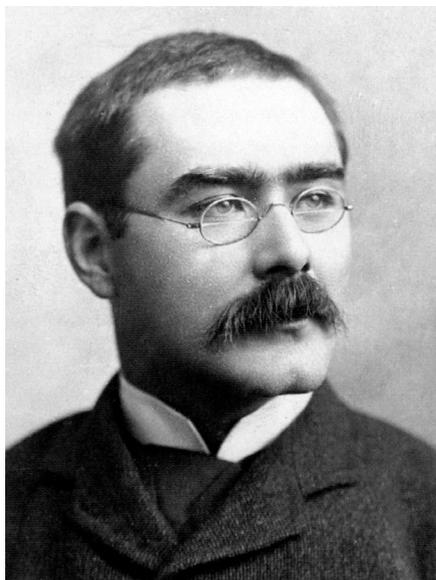
creativity and personal achievement. Theodore Roosevelt said it best during a speech in Paris in 1910:

It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong person stumbles ... The credit belongs to the one who is actually in the arena ... who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again ... but who does actually strive to do the deeds ... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.¹

It's a learning process, and it's a ride worth taking. Try not to make a habit of failure. But when it happens, take the path chosen by winners: don't look for soft excuses. Instead, compliment the team on its effort if it's deserved, but either way, bluntly face up to the realities underlying a failure. From that kind of honest assessment comes not only a catharsis of the lost opportunity but, more importantly, an inspiration to the team that it's okay to take a hit as long as a constructive strategy emerges to win the next round.

- Third is the capacity to *handle pressure*. Leadership traits emerge at the toughest of moments, when it's easy to lose concentration on the task at hand and to lose the confidence it takes to pull it off. The strongest seem to have the discipline and self-control that allows them to size up a situation, think it through, and then *act*. That process is infectious, and it inspires others to overcome panic, fear, or self-doubts that can otherwise freeze up even the most talented of teams.

So who's the poster child for cool leadership under pressure? Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger. He landed a dead aircraft in the Hudson River and then suggested everyone walk out onto the wings to calmly wait for a passing boat. He had to decide whether to turn back to the airport or to try something a little more creative—a water landing. You'll recall from the tapes that while the controller was urging a return to the airport, Sully said, "We're gonna be in the Hudson." What he demonstrated



Rudyard Kipling. (Photo from the book *Rudyard Kipling* by John Palmer, 1895.)

was a fundamental tenet of survival: make a decision and then act upon it. Even if it's a wrong decision, chances of survival and success are greater than endless debate and indecision.

Rudyard Kipling wrote it this way: "If you can keep your head when all about you/ are losing theirs and blaming it on you/ ... yours is the Earth and everything that's in it."² Adrenaline is both the culprit and the elixir here. That shot of adrenaline in response to a pressure-packed moment can cause a person to seize up or slide into a funk of confusion that dooms them to defeat. But if you channel that adrenaline to your strengths, it will not only ignite your body but, most importantly, will laser-focus your mind. The result is that you can exceed what you, or others, might have thought were your limitations. Even more gratifying is that you'll bring along those around you. Your team members will see *in you* that there's no reason to panic or overreact, so *they* won't. They'll follow your cue and will fully buy into your conviction that "we can win this."

So when pressure rears its ugly head, take that deep breath, size up the situation, focus your mind, and then act. That sequence of quiet self-assurance will be felt by everyone on your team. If they're dialed in, they'll immediately recognize your leadership and will respect the substance of your decisions.

- Closely tied to the concept of being strong under pressure is the *will to do whatever it takes not to fail*. To put it another way, it's not how you start but how you finish that counts. People with a high leadership quotient always seem to have that basic instinct to *finish it off*.

The charm of Michael Jordan was his ability to consistently turn on his after-burners during the fourth quarter, when the risks of failure were the highest. No matter how he started any given game, Jordan made his reputation by "delivering" when others would have choked or wilted from exhaustion.

He, and others like him (from boardrooms to battlefields), made it clear that you're never out of the fight, and those who have that determination to overcome pressure, exhaustion, fear, and the risks of defeat are the ones who ultimately carve out a legacy of leadership that others willingly follow.

Adrenaline is both the culprit and the elixir here.

Through the sheer force of will, the most competitive (and the most accomplished) share the same attitude, which screams, "Never say die." It plays out in every competitive environment, in the military or in any personal or professional endeavor. People who lead by the strength of their own will set an enduring example for others to follow—to take the risks, to handle the pain, to compartmentalize away the obstacles, and to never surrender. They are just not to be denied. They may get beat, and—to that extent—they may technically fail. But they don't ever give up and thereby never fail themselves or those who rely upon them.

Conclusion

The same model holds true in your role as a Marine, so take time to improve your leadership quotient. Here's an example in which each of these four leadership traits played a part in turning

a desperate battlefield situation into a Silver Star testament to survival and human triumph.

Al and George were part of a twelve-man long-range recon team in Vietnam. The enemy was engaged at dusk, but the firefight lasted until the outnumbered recon team fell back. Ten of the twelve hit the rally point, but two were missing. George found Al, who had lost an eye and a leg, but their path back to the other ten collapsed under a surrounding enemy force and total darkness, which rendered rescue impossible.

Both men knew they were on their own. They could not wait for help but had to *rely* upon themselves. There would be *no excuse* for failure, so they kept their heads, thought it through, and then *acted*. They stopped the bleeding, overcame the pain, ignored the fear, and had the *will* to use the stealth of darkness over the next ten hours to kill or be killed. They fought through the night and *finished it off* despite an early morning final enemy assault that otherwise should have consumed them.

Why did they succeed? Aside from being consummate warriors, Al and George excelled that night at those same core leadership traits that they repeatedly demonstrated over the next four decades of two lives well spent. The after-action report is a blunt gut check for us all and a roadmap to personal and professional achievement.

Notes

1. "The Man in the Arena" in *Citizenship in a Republic*, speech by Theodore Roosevelt at the University of Paris, (Paris, France: 23 April 1910).
2. Rudyard Kipling, "If—," *Rewards and Fairies*, (London, England: Macmillan, 1910), available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>.



"Reprinted courtesy of the *Marine Corps Gazette*."