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PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP AT THE SENIOR
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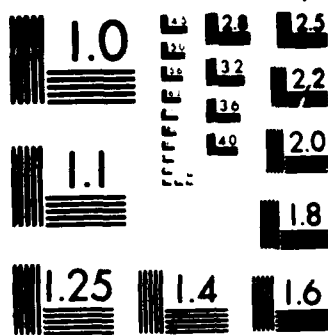
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PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON
LEADERSHIP AT THE SENIOR OFFICER LEVEL

An Individual Essay

by

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ABSTRACT

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PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP AT THE SENIOR OFFICER LEVEL

I. INTRODUCTION

In recognition of the complexity of leadership at the senior officer level, the purpose of this essay is to address the skills and characteristics which, in my opinion, are most critical or desirable in a successful senior leader. Moreover, this paper will discuss how these skills and characteristics impact on organizational climate and why some of these skills and characteristics make leadership at the senior level unique from those leaders at lower levels of responsibility. Specifically, the unique aspects of senior level leadership are germane in the general categories of professional, interpersonal and decision-making skills wherein the scope, complexity and criticality of a senior leader's focus extend well beyond that expected of more junior levels in the military hierarchy.

For purposes of this essay, senior leadership begins at the O-6 level and extends to higher echelons where the organizational structure and issues become increasingly complex and encompass multiple external influences and competing demands. In approaching this essay, I have drawn upon my personal experience, a review of literature written on this subject, historical examples as well as a variety of lecturers who have addressed the topic after having served in a position of senior level leadership.

II. LEADERSHIP DEFINED/OVERALL ROLE OF THE SENIOR LEADER

It is difficult to capture the essence of leadership because of its complex nature. Nonetheless, I believe that leadership is exhibited by an individual's ability to influence others--to have them follow enthusiastically as well as unhesitatingly. Senior leadership is the art of indirect influence and the skill of pulling large organizations together in a positive, action-oriented manner to create conditions of success. Unlike more junior leaders, senior leaders divide their energies between organizational concerns and the personal leadership of those who take direct action in their behalf.¹ Leadership at the senior level is an intricate process which requires senior leaders to be conscious of and foster conditions that maximize the effectiveness of organizations as systems and those individuals employed within those systems. The ability to provide a framework for the organization, a perspective or focus in the face of disarray, to develop, inspire and guide subordinates and to integrate the organization into a cohesive team underscores the essence of a successful senior leader.

Command and leadership are also difficult to separate in that leadership is the most important attribute that a commander must have in order to be successful. The role of the senior leader is to influence large numbers of people to accomplish missions which, in turn, requires a judicious blend of leadership and management. Command effectiveness is a function and commingling of leadership and management principles. A senior leader worthy of being one aspires to command and then, once having attained command, exercises it by setting high, no-nonsense but realistic goals, clearly defines those goals and priorities, communicates them downward and manages those resources

effectively to accomplish the mission and goals envisioned (i.e., establishes the vision).

Management of attention through vision is creating of focus. If a senior leader has an agenda and is results-oriented, the results get attention. The vision is compelling and pulls people toward it. Intensity coupled with commitment is magnetic and tends to automatically draw people to pay attention.²

An essential factor in senior leadership is the capacity to influence and organize meaning for the members of a large organization. At senior levels, the leader leads large units rather than individuals. Thus, a senior leader's view of the organization is more complex and takes into account and inter-relates more variables. The senior leader must have a future-oriented perspective and must examine the organization as it is and as it will evolve under present and anticipated conditions. In determining where the organization should be at some point in the future, the senior leader must also consider what the demands on the organization will be as well as the resource limitations--none of which can be readily quantified. Thinking of today's actions in terms of tomorrow's objectives requires awareness of the significance and impact of any decisions made. It is equally important that your subordinates understand what the objectives are and how they fit into the overall scheme of things in order that placement of the responsibility to execute the mission or tasks is accomplished at the lowest possible level.

Bennis and Nanus summed it up well when they said:

Leaders require foresight so that they can judge how the vision fits into the way the environment of the organization may evolve; hindsight so that the vision does not violate the traditions and culture of the organization; a world view within which to interpret the impact of possible new developments and trends; depth perception so that the whole picture can be

seen in appropriate detail and perspective . . .
and a process of revision so that all visions previously synthesized are constantly reviewed as the environment changes.³

III. PROFESSIONAL, INTERPERSONAL AND DECISION-MAKING SKILLS AND CHARACTERISTICS

While a personal vision is a necessary prerequisite, behavior and style are also important in rounding out the equation. A senior leader's style is strongly influenced by personality, and the style determines the mannerisms and mechanisms employed. A stereotypic style holds no validity when a comparison of the personalities of past successful leaders is made. Napoleon and George S. Patton, Jr. tended toward centralization of authority and flamboyant displays of their rank and position. Robert E. Lee and Omar Bradley employed a decentralized structure with a broad latitude for decision-making delegated to their subordinates. Ulysses S. Grant, though modest in his personal display of position (he wore the tunic of a private soldier), was a demanding taskmaster who drove his army to the limits of their endurance.⁴ This is not to imply that style is unimportant, however a universal pattern or common style cannot necessarily be attributed to all successful senior leaders. Thus, effective senior leadership requires more than just a vision. It also requires action.

Competence and Personal Example

Professional competence and personal example are critical to the implementation of a senior leader's personal vision. By a leader's actions or inactions, a signal is transmitted to subordinates and they respond accordingly. In other words, a senior leader must possess a technical and communicative competence in order to effectively convey to subordinates what they are to accomplish within the realm of the overall mission. Senior leaders

with only a superficial grasp of their organizations will soon find themselves without positive control. The more you know about your hardware and your people, the better position you are in to lead. Senior leaders who insulate themselves and fail to show personal interest in the work and welfare of their organization will breed disdain. A successful senior leader synthesizes interrelationships among various factors and, therefore, has a perspective that transcends a parochial focus in favor of achieving a common objective.

Secondly, the continued successful administration of large, complex organizations within our military services depends, in large measure, on setting a strong example of accountability in the just stewardship of our public trust. As a senior leader, you must conduct yourself in a manner that promotes trust and confidence in your superiors, your contemporaries, your subordinates and, last but not least, the public who are our employers. The citizens of our nation have placed in our custody vast resources which can have an impact beyond description. None of the services can afford to project a sloppy, careless or irresponsible image. Senior military leaders must raise their level of sensitivity to the inseparable principles of responsibility and accountability. The success of the mission of the services to defend the nation depends not only on how we exercise our duties and responsibilities but also on how the armed forces are perceived by the public. From such perceptions can come vigorous support or grudging acquiescence. This "call to accountability" is an important measure of the success of a senior military leader. In this era of increased military spending, the senior military leader has a unique opportunity and a challenge to make the

maximum use of the taxpayers' dollars. Members of Congress, other government agencies, consumer groups and the press scrutinize the military with a greater intensity than in the past. This makes it all the more important that we exert every effort to demonstrate that our motives and actions meet the highest public standards. Misconduct, fraud, waste and abuse cannot be tolerated at any level but it is especially inexcusable when done or allowed to go unchallenged by our senior leaders.

In this regard, one of the greatest challenges for a senior military leader is to ensure these concepts are communicated downward to the most junior level and that the intent is understood and carried out. A senior leader should never be disillusioned into thinking that just because you've directed that it happen it will happen. Personal follow-up and a lot of preliminary consensus-building are essential to these precepts. A senior leader cannot expect to lead large organizations single-handedly without strong support. So, selling one's ideas with conviction from the start is crucial. Setting the example of accountability, therefore, goes hand in glove with the verbal communication of this principle.

Although professional competence and personal example are important at the junior leadership levels as well, these characteristics become particularly critical at senior leadership levels because there is far less direct interface between the senior leader and those in the lower strata of the organization. Hence, the ability to influence large numbers of people in order to institutionalize your vision requires an enormous amount of credibility exemplified through competence and example.

Mission Focus and Dedication

Given the myriad of problems with which a senior leader must contend, it can be extremely difficult to ferret out which of them should take priority. When this happens, you must put them all in the context of the overall mission. Oftentimes the priorities become more obvious. In contrast to the junior military leader, almost everything that a senior leader is charged with is demanding in nature. Focusing on the mission is difficult because your affection for your own people must be subordinate to your dedication to the mission. While this concept may apply to junior levels of leadership as well, it doesn't vanish at the senior levels. In fact it becomes more convoluted primarily because of the magnitude and breadth of considerations involved. Akin to this is the deep sense of dedication that a senior leader must have in order to succeed. The leadership profiles of senior military officers such as Generals Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower and Patton show clearly that a dedication to one's career--a willingness to study, work and prepare--is another essential ingredient to success. While others spent time in social activities, these four officers worked war problems, held tactical and strategic discussions with accomplished contemporaries, taught classes, walked old battlefields, and reconstructed battles in their travels and during their off time. They grew professionally from studying the lives of other great warriors and military leaders as well as manuals on new weapons. Each craved responsibility, had the desire for command and asked to participate in every military action, both domestic and international, during their careers. This dedication must be nurtured throughout one's career in order to succeed in top command positions.

Visibility

Senior leaders practice some form of visual communication with their people, though each varies in his technique. Patton devoted much of his time to visiting the soldiers and insisted that his staff and commanders do the same. MacArthur was present for every landing in which his troops participated. Marshall and Eisenhower always found time to visit the troops or be seen by them.⁵ Unlike a junior leader whose span of control is much narrower, the senior leader must focus, to a far greater extent, on communicating with all echelons within the organization by being visible. Individual interface with all members on a regular basis is virtually impossible at the senior leadership level; thus periodic visibility becomes key to reaching out to the masses.

Decision-Making

Making decisions is fundamental to leadership. "You reach a conclusion based upon the facts as you see them, the evaluations of the several factors as you see them, the relationship of one fact to another and, above all, your convictions as to the capacity of different individuals to fit into these different places."⁶ In so doing, however, senior leaders must be extremely careful not to micromanage their subordinates. If senior leaders expect to inculcate a sense of responsibility in their subordinates, then they must, to the maximum extent possible, relay the objectives and tasks and leave the "how-to's" to them. It was characteristic of the four generals mentioned earlier to give full credit to their subordinates while playing down their own roles. They realized that no leader can do everything unilaterally;

particularly at the senior level, one must delegate substantially in order to succeed and survive. In delegating, however, senior leaders must be willing to accept the responsibility for the failure of their subordinates. This requires the senior leader to teach subordinates to "think past dinner" and to act as if the buck stops where they sit. In contrast to tendencies by senior leaders to micromanage subordinates, Bennis and Nanus argue that: "Leaders lead by pulling rather than by pushing; by inspiring rather than ordering; by creating achievable, though challenging, expectations and rewarding progress toward them rather than by manipulating; by enabling people to use their own initiative and experiences rather than by denying or constraining their experiences and actions."⁷

While decision-making and delegation take place at the junior leadership levels as well, the junior leader is more apt to make decisions affecting only a part of the organization and the impact of any decisions made will be short term in nature. The senior leader, on the other hand, makes decisions affecting the entire organization as a whole from a future-oriented perspective the impact of which will likely be long term in nature often with incomplete or contradictory data available.

IV. ETHICAL COMMITMENT

The senior leader is responsible for the set of ethics or norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization. Leaders can establish a set of ethics either by demonstrating through their own behavior their commitment to the set of ethics that they are trying to institutionalize, by choosing carefully the people with whom they associate and by reinforcing appropriate behaviors. Senior leaders find themselves set apart from the rest of the organization in the sense that they are subject to a great deal of scrutiny. They act as role models to subordinates and thus exercise a great amount of influence over subordinates' behavior and beliefs. Ethical behavior must be reinforced by the senior leader and any impediments to acting unethically must be removed. As a senior leader, the emphasis shifts from individual standards to organizational standards, practices and climate issues. In other words, the degree of moral complexity changes at the senior officer level. It is incumbent on the senior leader to avoid double standards-- in other words, consistency in ethical values must apply to both officer and enlisted personnel. By virtue of position and authority vested, senior leaders should hold themselves and be held by others to a higher standard than subordinates.

The fundamental factor that makes senior level leadership different from more junior levels is the ethical visibility of senior leaders who are charged to represent the profession and the organization in all that they do. Often in the military context, the authority of the senior leader is nearly absolute and the stakes at issue are crucial to society. The strength of the ethical

obligation must be commensurate with that responsibility. Senior military leaders must extend a concern for ethical commitment to all levels of the military hierarchy through example and education. Senior level leaders must coach subordinates in how to recognize and be sensitive to those actions or decisions which have an ethical component to it. Thus, organizational excellence demands that those who serve at senior levels involve themselves in shaping values and beliefs to the needs of the team.

V. TRUST

Successful senior leaders must have the ability to gain their subordinates' trust by consistency of behavior or reliability so that subordinates know what to expect and can depend on it. Trust is what maintains organizational integrity. "The truth is that we trust people who are predictable, whose positions are known and who keep at it; leaders who are trusted make themselves known, make their positions clear."⁸

There are binding dimensions of trust in the leader-led relationship-- in other words, factors that cement trust between the leader and the led at any level. These dimensions include judgment, loyalty, involvement, communications, competence and responsibility.⁹ These dimensions have a tremendous impact on command climate and interrelate with those skills addressed heretofore. Judgment involves knowing how best to motivate subordinates to get the job done. Not every situation calls for a fixed methodology of motivating and employing people effectively. While the ability to exercise good judgment is acquired through experience, senior leaders must be sensitive to the needs of those within their organization in order to build special trust and confidence. Loyalty involves knowing your people, looking out for their welfare and being tolerant of honest mistakes. Involvement is building teamwork, knowing your readiness posture and ensuring chain of command presence. Involvement means being seen at the lower levels at other times than merely during a crisis. Probably the most difficult job for a senior leader is ensuring that communication is widely understood. The importance of selectively checking the adequacy of the communication network throughout the command cannot

be overemphasized--particularly when communication at the senior level requires reaching people at several levels removed. Competence means knowing what is important and useful, mastering the fundamentals and then using the system and working within it. Senior leaders must possess both a planning and ethical competency. In planning they must be able to forecast future problems and programs or devise strategies to implement policies and conceptualize the organization from a systems perspective. Ethically, as addressed previously, the senior leader must act as a role model and identify potential conflicts of interest affecting the organization as a whole. Subordinates do not respect or identify with a leader whom they perceive to be indecisive, incompetent and lack the ability to plan. Responsibility entails seeking it, taking responsibility for your actions and developing it in your subordinates.

VI. ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

A key responsibility that a senior leader has is to create and sustain a command climate that promotes ethical excellence and professional commitment. Command climate is the total environment that surrounds a senior leader's organization within which its other members operate. Positive command climate results from actions taken by the senior leader which strengthens the organization by maintaining high morale, esprit de corps and close working relationships. "A healthy command climate establishes the way people feel about their responsibilities and interact with others and influences the degree to which they will commit themselves to organizational goals."¹⁰ The effectiveness of large units depends primarily on how subordinates feel about the teams of which they are a part. If the leadership climate is positive, unit cohesion will generally be high. Moreover, members of the organization will be inclined to take risks and be innovative. As a senior leader, you can control much, if not most, of the climate in which your people work.

Likert represents the whole of the leadership climate with a set of six major variables: leadership, motivation, communication, decisions, goals and control.¹¹ From a senior leadership position, the working essence of the leadership environment clusters around these variables which become the yardstick for measuring organizational climate to a great extent. Leadership centers around the confidence that senior leaders show in their subordinates as well as the subordinates' feelings of a senior leader's openness to them. It is important that senior leaders create an atmosphere in which a subordinate

feels free and comfortable in approaching them to express their views.

Motivation encompasses a feeling of responsibility for achieving organizational goals at all levels and a balanced use of involvement, punishment and reward to achieve a sense of cooperative teamwork. Communication should flow freely and accurately both up and down the chain of command in order that senior leaders become aware of problems faced by subordinates. A clear, concise articulation of the objectives and standards is crucial. A senior leader must be in both the receive and transmit modes and ensure consistency in word and deed. In other words, a senior leader must set priorities and act in ways to emphasize the importance of those priorities. Subordinates will then emulate the leader's character. Further, senior leaders must encourage both positive and negative feedback and not become intolerant of disagreement. One of the greatest hazards that senior leaders face is that too many people will tell you what they think you want to hear. So you have to work very hard at creating an atmosphere in which your subordinates are willing to disagree with you in order to avoid producing "yes men." In the decision-making process, senior leaders must be keenly aware of organizational sensitivity by assessing the impact of their decisions, particularly if the consequences produce an adverse effect on their people. Subordinates must also feel that they are involved in the decision-making process itself. They must be told where they fit into the big picture. This type of involvement produces the commitment and support for your organizational goals. The goals then become widely shared by your subordinates rather than resisted. In a peacetime environment, it is extremely important for a senior leader to explain to subordinates the reasons and value behind your actions or decisions

to the maximum extent possible so that in a stress or crisis situation, subordinates will respond better because of past confidence in the senior leader's judgment. Organizational review and control functions must be used primarily for correcting deviations, self-guidance and problem solving reasons. Its purpose should not be for the sake of finger pointing or placing blame but rather as a tool to learn and benefit from mistakes made. A healthy command climate has a direct bearing on the readiness of an organization. To develop and sustain the correct command climate, senior leaders must reach out to their organizations, trust their people and take risks on their behalf.

In general, I believe that there are certain key characteristics common to organizations headed by successful senior leaders. Benefits of a positive organizational climate will embody loyalty of its members to each other and to the organization, high morale, positive attitudes, resilience in the face of temporary setbacks and general excellence in the performance of demanding situations.

VII. INSIGHTS

There has been a great deal written on the subject of leadership and much of what has been said herein may appear to many readers as nothing more than a common sense approach to senior leadership. But to quote an expression which has been attributed to Will Rogers, "Just because it's common sense doesn't mean it's common practice."

In writing this essay, I have attempted to create an awareness of and sensitivity to some of the skills on which senior military leaders must focus as a basis for coping with the rapidly changing conditions and environment of military service today. My thoughts are not intended to offer fail-safe solutions to longstanding leadership challenges nor are they a substitute for practical experience. Rather, they are meant to assist future senior leaders in developing a fuller understanding of the concepts involved in leading, influencing and directing large organizations. From a personal perspective, this venture has given me the impetus to reflect on what I want to attend to as a senior leader facing the scope and complexity of tomorrow's problems. I trust that this essay will also serve other prospective senior leaders in a similar vein.

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3. Ibid., p. 102.
4. Samuel H. Hays and William N. Thomas, Taking Command: The Art and Science of Military Leadership, p. 38.
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8. Ibid., p. 44.
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