

Leader Development: From Initial Entry to the battlefield

By Sgt. 1st Class Felix A. Medina
Soldier Support Institute, Fort Jackson, S.C.

It has been said that leaders are born not made.

For many, this belief has dictated not only their choices, but also the course of their lives.

Over the course of my military career, I've changed my perspective about this statement. I now believe it's quite the opposite: Leaders are not born; they are made.

Throughout my 19 years of military service, I've seen the transformation of thousands of men and women. I've seen teenagers just out of high school, young adults beginning their voyage in life, longtime Soldiers dedicating their lives to serve and honor their country. These people from all walks of life, with different backgrounds represented in so many faces, smiles and eyes, share one common desire: Success.

We all made a choice to join the military. From the very first moment — getting off the bus, airplane or taxicab as we arrived at basic training — we experienced the single most significant event in our lives.

Like been struck by lightning, everything we knew was shaken and electrified. An earthquake of emotions overcame us. The mold that shaped the old “us” was broken, and a new “us” was born. All insecurities and shortcomings were forgotten. A new person — a Soldier — surfaced.

The beginning phases of Army training set the foundation to everything that later builds and guides our lives. The mentoring and guidance of drill sergeants and small group leaders lay the basic knowledge for all of us to follow. For the first time, “leadership” has special significance to us.

With good training and superb mentoring from our leaders, we learned the definition of a good leader. We came to know the secrets to becoming “all we can be”, an “Army of One” and “Army Strong.”

Defining our character

The Army's values following the acronym of LDRSHIP, are imprinted in our minds and come as second nature to us. The Army's principles of leadership become crucial and interdependent. We learn to be tactically and technically proficient in order to excel in everything we do — in garrison or during deployment.

Knowing yourself is imperative because it will help you focus on those areas where self-improvement is needed. Making Soldiers the number one priority on our list is achieved by knowing them and looking out for their welfare.

Establishing strong communication with our Soldiers is necessary to succeed. Setting a good example is a full-time job and rewarding in every way possible. Good communication helps ensure that the tasks at hand are always understood and

accomplished to standard with the competent supervision of our leadership.

As we train, we make sure that we train as a team. Every decision we make must be sound and timely. We cannot do it all by ourselves. It is essential that a cohesive team is built to be able to delegate missions to team members. We must develop a sense of responsibility in each one of our subordinates and never overestimate the capabilities of our unit. Having a strong understanding and an accurate assessment of the unit's capabilities ensures the proper planning to execute orders that will lead to a successful mission outcome. Never avoid responsibility; leaders must always be accountable for their actions.

With all these principles as part of our character, we now find ourselves following the Army values that define our lives, which in turn, make us all strong leaders.

As our military careers grow, bright minds are shaped and introduced to structured-system-approach training, aimed to maximize the capacity and skills of every Soldier who goes through it.

Every day, we are challenged to improve our way of life, and by default, make the Army and our communities better by taking on the most challenging efforts with courage.

We always arrive first and leave last because we care. We look out for others before ourselves. These qualities are now integral parts of our daily living.

The Army leadership skills we know were not part of our DNA coding or part of our genetic map when we were born. The principles and traits of leadership were not as important to us while growing up. Leadership was tailored and molded by the amazing transformation we went through in the Army.

The academics of leadership

Further, leadership is no longer an intangible concept.

Leadership is a field of study which experts and educators in academic circles cover as part of a variety of disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, anthropology and political science.

Leadership is considered by many scholars as a multidisciplinary field with origins that date back to Plato, Sun Tzu and Machiavelli. Leadership is part of the human nature that evolves with time and mutates based on necessity, environment, historical background and personal development.

Some may believe leadership isn't close to being a science, but it certainly draws heavily on ideas from the social sciences.

You can also see continual attempts to derive laws for leaders to follow, whether these come from statistical analysis, anecdotal evidence or the erroneous belief that following what great men did in the past can produce success today. All such attempts have this in common: They assume that analysis and categorization can produce laws or principles which, if followed faithfully, can more or less guarantee success in most circumstances.

In the Army, due to the repetitiveness of training and heavily

regulated courses of action, it is easier to come to better statistical examples of the practicability of these attempts.

New and inexperienced leaders crave such guidance, which is fed continuously through training and doctrine.

Ineffective leaders are told to improve their leadership skills or face a doubtful future in the Army.

There is a large industry of trainers, coaches and consultants, many of whom are dedicated to the notion that they know what makes for successful leadership. In some circles, that will not be manageable unless there's a notion of what true leadership is.

This the Army knows well — better than most.

Measuring our success

We are now able to measure leadership every day by seeing the results of our work.

We see it every day, from the early hours of the morning to the late nights before bed. We see it with every drop of sweat and blood from the warriors who dedicate their lives and service to our nation.

It is true that the Army has evolved enormously in the last decade. Our mentality has shifted toward new ideas and challenges that are transforming the way we do things, the way we fight wars, the way we lead our troops.

It seems a constant battle between “old school” versus “new school.” This transition between generations has allowed us as an institution to evolve into a force filled with a new type of leadership that continues to surprise us all.

We are constantly exposed to new leadership styles where everyone interacts at all levels. From the junior ranks to the senior leadership, everyone understands the importance of quality leadership.

When developing our leadership skills, we must ask ourselves an important question: “What leadership style works best for me and my organization?”

We can't teach and transform our Soldiers without first addressing this important issue.

Some of these different leadership styles range from autocratic to *laissez-faire*.

Not one style is best. We should employ the style that works in our particular organization. My favorite style — and the one I have had the most success with — is “participative.” It's hard to order and demand others to be creative, perform as a team, solve complex problems, improve quality and provide outstanding customer service when you're not able to show the subordinate that you are competent and willing to carry some of the work load yourself.

The participative style presents a happy medium between over-controlling (micromanaging) and not being engaged enough. This style tends to be seen in organizations that must innovate to prosper.

It is like parenting, where every aspect of the relationship between child and parent is important to the positive development of the child.

Walking backwards

My father used to say to me, “Don't you ever take a step backwards in life, not even to leap forward.”

This stuck with me until one day when I led a road march

during one of my unit's training exercises. I found myself telling some of my Soldiers to continue to move forward, to keep pushing toward the finish line.

As I motivated my Soldiers, my father's words kept ringing in my ears as loud as if he were talking to me in person. Then I noticed something surprising. My element was moving forward toward its destination, and as I moved with them, I realized I was walking backwards, looking to the rear of my element. It was then that I realized that my childhood lessons and my parents' teachings, although good, were not always totally accurate.

This might seem simplistic and trivial to many, but this realization had a profound significance in my life. That's when I realized that the Army had changed me in more ways than one.

Moving forward, our Army is focusing all our training to develop the leaders who will take us well into the future of warfare.

It is in garrison that we expose Soldiers to the realities of war and warfighting. It is here that we establish a strong foundation in the development of a unit's role in the leadership ladder.

Daily reminders on the importance of being aware and attentive, from the seemingly simple tasks — including preventive maintenance checks and services before, during and after any type of use of military equipment — to the constant counseling of our Soldiers, help us prevent loss, damage or destruction in the future.

The challenge ahead

We have an ongoing challenge as an organization: The ever-changing times.

Outdated systems and organizations can no longer afford to use their old dynamics during deployment to new and unstable battlegrounds. During these confused and chaotic times in new war environments, a new and different leader must emerge. That is why it is so important for us to continue to re-invent ourselves in every area to cope with the constantly changing obstacles that surround us.

Our senior leaders have a difficult job in today's volatile world. With so much turmoil and political distress around the world, the threats against freedom and our way of life are endless. The Overseas Contingency Operation (formerly known as the Global War on Terrorism) is our new challenge, and it's stretching our military strength to the limits. Our responsibilities as leaders have become increasingly vital to unit cohesion and mission accomplishment.

It is imperative that leaders and their subordinates be capable of dealing with long deployments and stressful pre-deployment training operations. These stressors can quickly diminish the effectiveness of a unit. Without strong leadership, the chances of failure increase and the confidence of the unit's Soldiers decreases.

The definition of Army leadership is the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction and motivation. While purpose and direction have become clear in the Overseas Contingency Operations, motivation sometimes is missing.

As the new generation of Army leaders, we must find ways

See LEADER page 43 →

to keep our soldiers motivated and inspire them to put unit welfare, mission and motivation before individual interests — even in the most demanding situations. If we want to be great leaders, we must recognize the capabilities and limitations of our Soldiers. To do our best, we must ensure that the extent of our missions do not exceed our limitations.

Constant awareness of the contemporary operational environment must be priority on the daily plan. It's easy to lead while the conditions are optimal, but it is hard when things are not going as planned. That is when a real leader emerges and takes command of the situation.

Many times we find ourselves exceeding the expectations of our peers because we were taught to find ways to increase the efficiency of our capabilities.

How many times have we accomplished what seemed impossible?

It should not be surprising to see how we employ those lessons learned during our military careers to our daily lives. Every day we learn something new. Every moment we find a new tool we can use to further our skills and capabilities.

This may not have been possible before we were transformed by the Army.

We were not born this way; we were made this way.

A perishable skill

Leadership is a perishable skill. We must not let our guard down and forget to cultivate and maintain this valuable set of skills. Just like an engine, all parts must be kept clean, maintained, serviced, lubricated and charged. Old parts must be replaced and updated.

Leadership has many enemies that should be avoided at all costs:

- Selfishness can jeopardize the health of our leadership. When we find ourselves focused on what we want without consideration to what others want or need, the very roots of a healthy command become poisoned.

- Power struggles can be mistaken as healthy competition, but often these will erode the communication bridge between elements. Jealousy is not compatible with any leadership style. It is absolutely counterproductive and it will lead to failure.

- Poor communication will also guarantee failure. If we don't communicate effectively, our message will be misunderstood, misinterpreted and misplaced.

- Our behavior and self-awareness are key issues. We need to know ourselves and understand the things that make us lose control. We must learn when to delegate and when to take the lead. A leader must learn to serve, not demand.

When leaders emerge

As our nation is at war against an unorthodox enemy, we should rely on the basic principles of leadership. It is in the trenches where leadership is often tested.

A leader emerges and passes knowledge to others in order to keep the continuity that makes our organization so unique and successful.

We have seen our nation's leaders succeed. We have witnessed their accomplishments, their heroics; their teachings mark the lives of those touched by their feats.

Now, we look to the future and deliver to new generations of Soldiers the skills that will help them become leaders of tomorrow. Just like us, and the leaders before us, they will undergo a transformation and realize that they weren't necessarily born leaders — the Army has made them leaders.