

How leaders should build loyalty . . . and why

Building bridges with subordinates, troops make combat-ready units

For those who bear the burden of leadership, loyalty must be considered the most important trait in a good soldier. The issue of loyalty becomes all the more important at senior levels because of the tremendous impact senior

leaders have on leaders subordinate to them. No senior military leader can hope to train effective, combat-ready units, in peace or war, without the loyalty of subordinates.

The recent Field Manual 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels*, states clearly the important issues dealing with the tough topic of leadership. There is one exception — the treatment of the subject of loyalty. It can be argued that the subject is covered within the presentation on ethical responsibilities, but the topic is important enough to warrant separate and significant consideration.

Writing for *Infantry* magazine a few years ago, I defined loyalty as "the patriotic, professional and emotional tie which binds a soldier to his country, his unit and his comrades." Loyalty is what roots are to a tree. If the tree is to be strong, those roots must be nourished. As soldiers, we swear an oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States." Our first loyalty is to this document, which represents the collective will of the people. These are our roots. As military professionals, we risk our lives and subordinate our wills to the execution of military missions deemed appropriate by our elected leadership. Soldiers do not have the luxury of choosing their conflicts.

In that all human beings are flawed, so is all we attempt. This is especially true for senior leaders. All suffer from imperfections. Senior leaders live in a fishbowl — under constant observation by subordinates, peers and superiors. The pressure is significant. Poor decisions made at

higher levels of command have an adverse effect on many. Regardless, these individuals must constantly seek the perfection that is always out of their grasp. To attempt less would be a betrayal of their soldiers. Too many lives hang in the balance. Even in peacetime, leadership at the senior grades places enormous burdens on the individual.

Two things influence loyalty more than others — competence and caring. The first can be learned. Many in our corps would argue that we have some of the best-educated officers in the world. What about caring, though?

First, senior leaders do not lead troops. The last time an officer actually led troops normally would have been while serving as a platoon leader. A senior leader's job, then, is to take care of troops by taking good care of subordinate leaders, and to ensure that they, in turn, take care of soldiers. Senior leaders set the example here, as in all else.

Caring for the needs of subordinate leaders is essential in building that intangible bond of loyalty. A senior leader, when first assuming command, can expect professional loyalty. But personal loyalty, which in times of great stress may be more valuable, often will be withheld by subordinates until the senior officer proves to be both competent and caring.

Walking the tightrope

A senior leader who fails to take care of subordinate leaders cannot build the necessary bond that will ensure a subordinate's loyal fulfillment of his intent. This is like walking a tightrope. There is a conflict between the mission and the welfare of subordinate leaders and staff. The senior leader must attempt to meet the professional and personal needs of his subordinate commanders and staffs, as well as the dictates of mission.

A senior leader who single-mindedly pursues mission accomplishment will destroy organizational effectiveness and preclude any chance for a positive command climate. Although not often considered, command climate affects officers as much, and in some cases more, than enlisted soldiers. The officers often are closer to the "heat source." In fact, a powerful case can be made that if a senior leader spends most of his time taking care of his subordinates, the mission will take care of itself. Although overstated, I believe that axiom contains an essential truth.

How to accomplish the goal of establishing loyal relationships with one's subordinates is largely dependent upon an officer's personal qualities. These qualities are difficult to teach, but not difficult to recognize. Aside from

developing his own competence and providing the necessary organizational focus — a vision — the senior leader's most important task should be establishing the ties of loyalty upon which trust grows. Senior leaders must demonstrate that trust by avoiding the curse of micromanagement and allowing subordinate leaders to make decisions concerning how missions are to be accomplished.

In time of war, there is no question that accomplishing the mission is of more value than individual lives. In time of peace, the reverse should be true. A senior leader must make it a priority to build the bridge of loyalty. It is unlikely that we will have as much time as was the case in the Persian Gulf War. The senior leader can accomplish this by avoiding the overuse of the traditional chewing-out. This technique can be effective, but only in a private setting. It is unwise to denigrate anyone in public. Such an event will not be forgiven easily, and ultimately can be counterproductive.

When subordinates make honest mistakes, it is time to remember that peacetime is the occasion to make errors. Most of us will benefit more from a quiet counseling session that covers those things done poorly, and ends with praise for those things done well. Senior leaders must make a special point to be positive. When the boss is in a foul mood, it affects everyone. When the boss is upbeat, subordinates will tend to reflect those feelings.

Also, senior leaders should not wait to find out what subordinate leaders feel they require in the way of professional schooling, assistance with family problems, or time off. The very best leaders seek this information, attempt to anticipate subordinate's needs, and subsequently attempt to make it happen for them. It takes time and commitment. The human equation is invariably the most difficult to solve, but potentially has the highest payoff.

Attempting to build the bridge was no doubt a priority to a number of senior commanders who were deployed in the Gulf War. It must be remembered that the guts of any military unit are found in the feelings of loyalty soldiers feel toward one another, their leaders and their nation. For officers, this consideration of loyalty is no less important than to privates. Field Manual 22-103 is a fine document with one important flaw. Too little space is devoted to the critical subject of loyalty for senior leaders.

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