

Marine Corps Principles and Traits of Leadership, Part 2

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Last month, we considered the first principle of leadership recognized by the Marine Corps: Know yourself and seek self-improvement. We considered also the first trait of a leader: Justice. This month, we will examine the second principle, which is to be technically and tactically proficient, and the important trait of judgment.

The Marine Corps' understanding of technical and tactical proficiency holds in part that "[l]eaders are not only great with people, but also effective at doing their job. Therefore, the best leaders are also terrific at their craft. They generally have advanced knowledge and expertise within a specific trade or profession." Moreover, leaders seek always to improve. Leaders have responsibilities that contribute to the mission of an organization as well as their duties as leaders, and in these responsibilities one is obliged to pursue excellence. Here we might encounter what for some people will seem a controversial claim, namely that we should recognize and pursue standards of excellence in every field of endeavor. However, when the Marine Corps was created by the Continental Congress in 1775, the assertion that we should hold to standards of excellence was commonplace, obvious, and hardly controversial. In any form of athletic competition, the point being made comes clear. Runners, for example, start a race at

the same starting line, but at the finish line a natural hierarchy has emerged as some runners come closer to the mark of excellence than do others, even though every runner is a fine athlete. To some people, the arrangement one sees at the starting line is one of equality, and this is good. Thus in order for this good to be an enduring feature of our arrangement, it must also be the condition one finds at the finish line. While the sentiment being expressed here may be admirable, it results in the undoing of competition, and with it, the undoing of excellence as a goal of the activities of people together in society. That is, we will always find individuals possessed of the drive to excel, but society is far better off when the drive to excel is held before the members of a society and of organizations within it as a good to be pursued by everyone, understanding that some will come closer to excellence than others. However, and this is a critical element of a well-ordered people, it is important to have standards in all parts of society that will ensure not only the production of excellence in mind and body, but also that the average found among a people is kept as high as possible.

We human beings are equal in the possession of the rights that emerge from human nature. Thus we read in our Declaration of Independence from the British empire: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness--..." It is not often observed that the Commonwealth of Virginia declared its independence from Britain in June of 1776, nearly a month before the declaration of the other colonies of British America on July 4. The first section of the Virginia declaration, which influenced the writing of the July 4th Declaration, reads as follows: "That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." In our time, the ideas expressed here are held by many to be obvious, and by many others, held in contempt. What was different then is that while there were many people both here and in Europe who held these ideas in contempt, to those who embraced them, they were truly revolutionary. Europeans were just emerging from feudalism as the arrangement of social order in which most people labored to serve the interests of a few. However, the idea was emerging, especially among the English and the Scots, that all people are created with the same nature and thus we are all possessed of the rights that derive from this nature. This means that no person comes into the world with a natural obligation to serve the interests of another person. This idea was captured in the famous line uttered by Richard Rumbold on the occasion of his execution for participating in resistance against Charles II of England: "No one comes into the world with a saddle on his back, nor any booted and spurred to ride him."

This is what is meant by saying that "all Men are created equal." Thus, we can see what the Virginians of 1776 meant by declaring that "all men are by nature equally free and independent," and in this condition, it is the responsibility lying before each of us to make of this freedom what we will. While we are equal in the sense described above, we are most unequal in the particulars of our individuality. We are not equally

artistic, intelligent, athletic, disciplined, energetic, inquisitive, adventurous, gregarious, and so much more. This explains why people do different things in life and to differing effects. Yet these differences make possible societies of mutual interdependence in which the strengths of individuals can be developed, and their weaknesses ameliorated, thus maintaining a social order in which each person can flourish *as a human being*. Here we can see more deeply into the wisdom of saying that a leader, one who leads others, and importantly directs and governs his own life, must be “technically and tactically proficient,” since these proficiencies are important in choosing goals and in accomplishing them.

While it is true that the leadership trait of judgment is a skill, a virtue, really, that aligns beautifully with technical and tactical proficiency, it will align beautifully with all of the Corps’ principles of leadership. We find it described this way: “Judgment is the ability to make sensible decisions consistently after calmly examining important details. For example, a leader with sound judgment might predict obstacles before they happen and create strategies to counter those challenges by collaborating with experts.” This description of judgment is admirably practical, which is fitting for what is in fact one of the most important of the practical virtues. Most people have had the experience of meeting someone whose life seems to careen from one crisis to another. Such people are, of course, extreme examples of the importance for each person of sound judgment since they demonstrate the havoc to be visited upon someone by consistently unsound judgment. We often comment here on Aristotle’s observation that whatever human beings do can be done well or badly. Among the most fundamental and important things we human beings do is to direct our lives from day to day, and as we can see around us, it can be done well or badly.

Upon first considering the skill of judgment, we see that it is the ability consistently to take sensible judgments after calm consideration of the facts at hand. There’s a fair amount here to digest. What is it for a judgment to be sensible? Is it always sensible to avoid risk whether of injury, death, or material loss, or is it sometimes sensible to accept such risks? When considering the nature of courage we see that in the presence of danger, one can act bravely, or cowardly, or foolishly. Courageous acts are of their nature sensible; cowardly and foolish acts are not. It might seem counter-intuitive to say that one can lose life or property in consequence of an action that was wholly sensible, but what constitutes a sensible judgment is determined by the circumstances one faces. This good sense has an honorable pedigree that includes the argument of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) that in order to judge the morality of an act, one must know three things: what was done, the circumstances under which it was done, and the intention of the one performing the act.

Yet it is not enough to take sensible judgments, but also one must do this consistently. Of course, the importance of consistency needs little defense. Most of us will not trust someone who inconsistently keeps promises, which is a vice that is particularly hard on marriages. Neither will most people consistently patronize a restaurant where the food is not consistently good. Importantly, the consistent taking of sensible judgements is the fruit of the calm examination of important details. The first

skill to understand here is the ability to isolate and identify, among the details of the circumstances one faces, the ones that are truly important to the judgment one must take. Here we see the importance of technical and tactical proficiency, for the processes of becoming technically proficient involve learning how to sort out and rank-order the more and the less important aspects of developing and exercising any skill whatever, and developing tactical proficiency involves the skill of seeing, through any set of circumstances, what needs to be done. This latter, tactical proficiency, is deeply embedded in our western moral tradition as the virtue of practical wisdom. Doing this calmly can be a challenge depending on the situation one faces, but remaining calm is made eminently easier for someone who is technically and tactically proficient. It is important when writing, for example, to be able to think and write at the same time. However, for someone writing at a computer keyboard who is not proficient at typing on a keyboard, thinking while writing becomes extremely difficult because so much of one's mental energy is consumed concentrating on the mechanical process of typing. Perhaps we speculate a bit here, but it seems right to say that remaining calm in danger or when judgments must be formulated and taken quickly, or both, given technical and tactical proficiency, is an ability that comes naturally to some people and not naturally to others. For those in the latter category, one cannot think of a remedy other than experience.

Finally, we observe that the Marine Corps holds that leaders possessed of good judgment must be able to anticipate obstacles, and here we see yet again the importance of practical wisdom for it is one thing to anticipate obstacles that truly could come up, and another to spend what little time that is available focusing on obstacles that are highly unlikely to occur. One might get things wrong, but often when in circumstances that are complex, the best judgment is not obvious, and in this situation, one looks to give himself and others the best chance of success. We find also from the Marine Corps the wisdom of collaborating with others. It is easy to understand that in any endeavor people might undertake, the likelihood of success and the likelihood that the people involved will experience the work as interesting and rewarding increases as the level of technical and tactical proficiency of those involved increases. What increases also in a situation like this is the confidence a leader can have in the prudence of collaborating with those around him. Of course, listening to others does not oblige a leader to follow their advice. One can follow the advice of others more-or-less fully, but also partially. This can happen when an action urged to be taken does not seem to be the best one available, but the analysis casts light on the situation that clarifies the best judgment.

Know yourself and seek always to improve. This is done in part by developing and improving technical and tactical proficiency. These are important principles to be held and practiced not only by Marines, but by everyone. The leadership traits of justice and judgment easily may be seen as fundamental qualities of every sound and well-developed person. So we can say with confidence that a well-developed Marine is a well-developed American, and the more such citizens there are in any country, the more prosperous, free, and secure it will be.