

CAROLINA MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

Principles and Traits of Marine Corps Leadership

Part VI

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Marine Corps recruits at Parris Island, South Carolina have the interesting experience of a pattern guiding the way drill instructors train them. In an ordinary day at that extraordinary place recruits will learn several skills. The pattern begins with one or more drill instructors explaining the task to the recruits and repeating themselves when necessary to ensure that the task is understood. Then, a drill instructor will perform the task so recruits can see it done correctly. When the recruits seek to execute correctly the task they've just learned, drill instructors supervise closely. In some cases,

recruits don't quite get it right, so the task is done again ensuring that it is understood by each recruit, since if the task is not understood, it will not be accomplished.

This pattern expresses the Marine Corps leadership principle of ensuring the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished. It is evident on even cursory examination that this principle has three elements. The first element, ensure the task is understood, requires communication. That communication is required is obvious, but it isn't always obvious what communication means. First, communication can take various forms like semaphore, Morse code, hand signals, or writing, and like all forms of communication, these each have strengths and weaknesses. Of course, communication takes place under differing circumstances such as emergencies in which communication must take place without the benefit of questioning and answering. For this discussion, we will consider this leadership principle operating within the context of training or educating where the people involved are gathered together.

It is a commonplace assertion that not everyone is a good communicator. We meet people from time-to-time who know their field of study or practice extremely well but seem not to be able to explain things in ways that others readily grasp. Perhaps the most useful way to negotiate the difficulties created by unskillful explanations of things is for those being instructed to ask clarifying questions. Interestingly, an instructor who doesn't communicate very well can improve by attending carefully to the questions he is asked, since these will indicate to the instructor how people misunderstand him. If we think of communicating using conversation as our example, one thing of importance stands out: listening. One might think that most people have had the experience of talking with a person who clearly isn't listening. Whatever we might call this, it isn't a conversation; communication, properly understood, isn't happening because no understanding is taking place. In order for communication to happen, for understanding to emerge, people must listen. It seems correct to say that listening isn't truly a passive act. Rather, a listener must focus in order to grasp the words being spoken, the speaker's tone of voice, and facial and physical gestures. Reading, interestingly, is a form of listening but without the cues of tone of voice and gestures, which is why people in the ancient world held reading to be second best. One cannot ask questions of a book, and a reader doesn't have the benefit of the teacher physically being present. Reportedly, if someone entered a library in a medieval university there would not be silence because students tended to read out loud in order to hear the words spoken.

When a leader is certain that he has been understood, the task must then be supervised to ensure it is accomplished correctly. Here we see the importance of knowing oneself and seeking self-improvement, and being technically and tactically proficient, the first two leadership principles, to ensuring a task is understood and to supervising it to successful completion. Here we might consider styles of supervision, but in general we can say that how to supervise a task will be determined by the task itself and the leader's knowledge of the people he is supervising. It is said of our namesake here at the Al Gray Marine Leadership Forum, General Al Gray, that when leading other leaders, he would ensure that commander's intent was understood and then trust the leaders to decide how best to accomplish it. When a leader would come to General Gray for advice about accomplishing a task, he would discuss various options and let the leader decide from there.



The point is, of course, that there are different ways of supervising others, and we can reasonably say that it is as much art as science.

The leadership trait of tact is not one that recruits would readily associate with drill instructors. At “Marine OCS Blog” one finds tact defined this way: “Tact means that you can deal with people in a manner that will maintain good relations and avoid problems. It means that you are polite, calm, and firm.” Understanding tact in this way, it is clear that a leader who possesses the trait of tact will be more effective at ensuring understanding of a task and supervising it to successful completion. We may say that we all

know what it is to be polite, but this definition of tact adds to politeness calmness and firmness. There are many possible situations in which either circumstances, people’s behavior, both, or unforeseen developments can incite in someone anger or frustration, but a tactful leader will control those feelings and not let them show. Moreover, a leader, or anyone, with a calm mind is much better able to think through problems and respond effectively than is someone struggling to shake off anger or irritation.

Firmness is not the same as stubbornness. Someone who is stubborn, for example, is unlikely to concede that he is wrong even when it is demonstrated. This is most undesirable because someone who is not able to see that he is wrong cannot learn. More important is that someone who is stubborn and wrong in any set of circumstances is likely to get himself and others hurt, or in any case, fail at a task. But a leader who will listen to the questions and observations of subordinates and consider them is in a much better position than is the stubborn fellow. Nevertheless, when a decision must be taken and executed, a tactful leader will possess the firmness of character to see that the moment of action has arrived and proceed with determination.

A leader who is determined to act justly, is possessed of sound judgment, is dependable, takes initiative, and is decisive will surely be tactful, and will be able effectively to make each task understood by those who will perform it, and to guide them to successful accomplishment of whatever tasks are assigned.