

CAROLINA MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

Principles and Traits of Marine Corps Leadership, Part 3

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In an essay titled “On Remembering Who We Are,” the late Melvin Bradford observed the following: “Yet as [Michael] Oakeshott insists, moral conduct is an art, insofar as it concerns the relations of men—an art learned by apprenticeship. And society is the necessary context of that learning.” The point that is made here is meant to stand in contrast to the modern idea that morality is learned by studying theories, principles, and precepts which ideally are worked out intellectually free of the constraints of a living moral tradition. For Bradford, and the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Christians, too, morally good behavior is learned in practice, and this is best done when people are young so that when they reach adulthood, and are able to understand the reasons for behaving as they had been taught, there are no, or few, bad habits to overcome. Thus, Plato’s insistence that education is first of all training in the habits of goodness. Of course, this

requires some agreement on what those habits of goodness are, and this is the product, most often, of a shared understanding of what a community or a people exist in history to do, that is, an understanding of who we are.

Marines understand what they exist in history to do: make Marines, defend our country, and return good citizens to our communities. In pursuit of this purpose, we find the third of the Corps' eleven principles of leadership: "Know your people and look out for their welfare." This principle is described as among the most important principles of leadership. The importance of knowing the people one leads is crucial because an organization of people is an organization *of people* and not a machine. The various parts of a machine do not think for themselves or do any of the other uniquely human things that we do, and thus to regard and to lead a human organization as if it were a machine, and the people understood as interchangeable parts within it, is a serious mistake. Marines, and all people involved in missions or projects with other people, have families with the loves and responsibilities they entail. They each have personal histories that condition how each one interprets and experiences his or her life. We each have aspirations for our futures which, among young people especially, occupy a significant part of one's daily reflections. In short, while we are each human, we are each individual human beings with our own personalities and our own strengths and weaknesses that give us custom-made paths of personal moral and intellectual development. This is why it can be extremely disruptive and counter-productive to treat a human organization as a machine because the important human personality of each member of the group is treated as insignificant in defiance of the clear truth of the matter. This generates frustration, resentment, anger, and contempt for the leader, all to the detriment of the unit and its mission.

It is among the most important and ancient of observations about ourselves that we are social beings, in need of the society of others. Importantly, not all human societies are alike. The word "society" is derivative of Latin *societas* meaning partnership, fellowship, association, alliance. The nature of a society is heavily influenced by the purpose of the society. The first society we encounter is the family which operates on love,

sharing, protection, and sacrifice where required. In the general understanding of what most people think of as society, that is, the gathering of friends and strangers in a particular place having a common language and understanding of the world, families band together into villages because no family can provide for itself everything needed for prosperous and secure lives. However, trade and security are even better facilitated when villages come together into regional polities with governments at each level, family, village, province, having duties delegated at each level for the well-working of the society. It is significant to note that no matter what kind of society we consider, for whatever purpose designated, every kind of society is comprised of human beings, and so the same goods inhere such as love, loyalty, honesty, justice, accountability, forgiveness and more. These, of course, are moral goods to be understood and practiced, as Bradford has said, in apprenticeship for precisely the reason that moral conduct is an art that is learned by practice. The Marine Corps understands this, whether or not it is articulated this way, since moral apprenticeship in acts of leadership and in loyal and disciplined following are critical in producing good citizens who will one day leave the Marine Corps and return to civilian society.

It seems obvious to say that if a leader wants to treat his unit as an organization of human beings rather than as a machine, the first task is to get to know the people in the organization. Of course, in professional organizations like the Marine Corps, there must exist between leaders and those whom they lead a decorous “professional distance” that prevents relations within the organization from becoming too familiar to the detriment of discipline and focus. However, this does not mean that the process by which a leader comes to know his people may become a wooden technique the application of which appears to everyone to be a meaningless gesture of “morale raising,” since clumsy efforts like this are as they seem: insincere. Such basics should be well in hand, like knowing people’s names, whether they are married, spouses’ names, whether they have children, what aspirations a Marine may have whether in the Corps or after it, and the like. How this is done should not be put into a formula for

this creates the very kind of technique it is good to avoid. We should hold in mind that while we each possess the fundamentals of human nature, that is a mind and a free will, we express and develop our natures in different ways, including the phenomenon that some of us interact and converse with other people with greater facility and skill than do others.

It is important for an organization that there is “strong communication,” and to this end, members of an organization should know one another and interact regularly and develop friendships where possible. Among the benefits this brings to every member of an organization is a concern each for the welfare of the others thus improving well-being and the important sense of belonging. This is important to missions of all kinds, but the Marine Corps puts it this way: “Consequently, the best Marines put the welfare of others before their own. They are willing to be injured or perish to protect others and maintain the objective.” It is probably not the case that those of us who do not serve in the military anymore or perhaps did not serve will work in organizations in which perishing is a possibility, but we can see from the Marine Corps how important it is to know the people with whom we work, and to be concerned for their welfare.

Dependability is a leadership trait that fits perfectly with the principle of knowing one’s people and looking out for their welfare. Dependability is a leadership trait because it is a necessary quality of the moral characters of well-developed people, which leaders must strive to be. Every society is in danger of demise when the people in it are not dependable, when, for example, marriage vows are not held to be binding, when the responsibilities of fathers and mothers do not make a greater claim on us than our personal desires and wants, when truth-telling is optional, or when taking up arms in defense of home and country is thought to be in itself noxious. In other words, there cannot be a healthy society in which the people are not reliable, dependable, possessed of a firmly held sense of duty. We find dependability defined this way: “Dependability means that you perform the responsibilities of your role, complete projects and remain loyal to the chain of command. For example, a dependable leader might

offer to take responsibility for tasks and complete them consistently to meet expectations.” Interesting examples of dependability include arriving to work early, increasing productivity by limiting distractions while at work, and collaborating with others in order to complete tasks on time.

It seems reasonable to say that the importance of arriving early so that the work of the day can begin at the appointed time and collaborating with others are obvious expressions of dependability. In our time, however, the importance of limiting distractions seems to be particularly important. One might think that the problem isn't much of an issue in the Marine Corps, but since Marines come to the Corps from the broader American society, it would be strange if our problems with distractions and shrinking attention spans have not affected the military in general. This is a concern that receives too little attention. It is fairly common when explaining ideas or events to students to hear someone say that he can't understand what is being said. Sometimes this is true, but the lack of understanding is remedied by the discipline of constancy in focus, rehearsing the material until one has it in hand. In other words, the problem lies in a failure to bring discipline to one's mind. Here is where the presence of distractions can become acute. In general, distractions distract because they don't require effort to understand, and so when someone is studying something that is demanding and requires focus, wandering after some light diversion that makes no intellectual demands is experienced by many people as a bit of a welcomed vacation from the work at hand. But as diversions multiply, they can render someone ineffective at his work, and thus a hinderance to the mission of his organization.

It is well understood that every power developed that can be used for good and beneficial ends can be used also for harmful or nefarious ends. Richard M. Weaver sought carefully to explain how it happens that the more development that occurs in technologies of communication, the poorer the quality of the communication facilitated by it. We might pause over the term “social media” to consider whether the phrase accurately describes the phenomenon in question. Nevertheless, many people think that with whatever benefits come to us from these technologies, they

contribute as well to coarsening of manners and reductions in attention span. Both of these consequences are failures of discipline, which is a crucial element in dependability. One hears that the crudeness of people on social media owes to the anonymity involved, which suggests that when people are talking together in person, some of them conceal a contempt they secretly harbor. If this is true, we might have before us a good case for interacting with one another in person as much as possible since for a great variety of activities, learning the disciplines involved improve us morally and intellectually. So, we can concentrate with some profit on the discipline of expanding attention spans. Analogies can be tricky because comparisons that fit neatly are rare, yet anyone who has studied topics that are intellectually demanding has had the experience, rather like training the body with the resistance of weight, of the ability to focus growing with the persistent effort of concentration. The ability grows both in intensity and duration, that is, with discipline and effort, one's attention span can grow.

This is no small thing because the intensity and duration with which one is able to concentrate on something is the means by which distractions can be pushed aside while doing anything, and this is a central part of being dependable. It is also an important trait in coming to know one's people and perceiving what serves their well-being, to becoming technically and tactically proficient, and to knowing oneself and seeking always to improve.

M.E. Bradford, in *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 1985, p. 12.

See Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, University of Chicago Press, 1948, especially chapter VIII, "The Power of the Word."