

Leadership Secrets of the Army's Top Generals

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Major General John M. Schofield identified this key element in the 1879 graduation address to the West Point Corps of Cadets. An excerpt from the address later came to be known as Schofield's Definition of Discipline. So integral - the Army adopted it as its basic guideline on how to lead.

As the major general explains, reliability among team members during competition, or performance discipline, is based upon respect. This is not instilled by harsh treatment, namely belittling or berating, rebuking or ridiculing, disparaging or deriding. After all, with harsh treatment by the leaders comes resentment and resignation on the part of the team. That is more likely to prove the downfall of a team than its fortification.

Instead, leaders must provide direction in a credible and compelling way. A leader's tone of voice alone must inspire to the extent that he engenders a conviction in the team to buy in whole-heartedly. As the saying goes, when the leader says, "jump!" The team, asks, "How high?" Simply put, it is not a matter of compliance so much as an unwavering commitment. Moreover, the tone must be sincere. Teams can sniff out disingenuous sentiment.

Respect is born of reciprocity between the team captain (or leader) and the team. If a leader respects his teammates, then the team will be more likely to respect the leader. Just as respect is revisited upon the leader, the same is true for disrespect. Respect is not a zero-sum game. There is a multiplier effect, not a diminished capacity.

Several generals have provided elaboration or clarification on Schofield's words.

General Dwight Eisenhower differentiates between the impact of credible versus coercive leadership tactics: "I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him, he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, then he is gone." Scare tactics are coercive and only temporary; however, persuasion is credible and long term.

General Omar Bradley admonished, "Leadership means firmness, not harshness; understanding, not weakness; pride, not egotism." Leaders should be firm, understanding and have pride. Implied in all of these distinctions is a selfless devotion to the team. Understanding suggests a sense of knowing the overall mission, the big picture, the driving direction of the team. Firmness indicates a sense of purpose in doing what is in the best interest of the team (implementing a course of action) and effectively communicating that rationale. Finally, pride is team-centered; egotism is self-centered.

General Maxwell Taylor further distilled the importance of service in leadership: "History will show that no man rose to greatness, who could not convince his troops that he put them first." Just as there is reciprocity of respect there is reciprocity of service between leaders and their teams.

Schofield's Definition of Discipline:

The discipline which makes soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instruction and to give commands in such manner and such tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself, while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.

"Aim for Goals Higher Than Ten Feet"