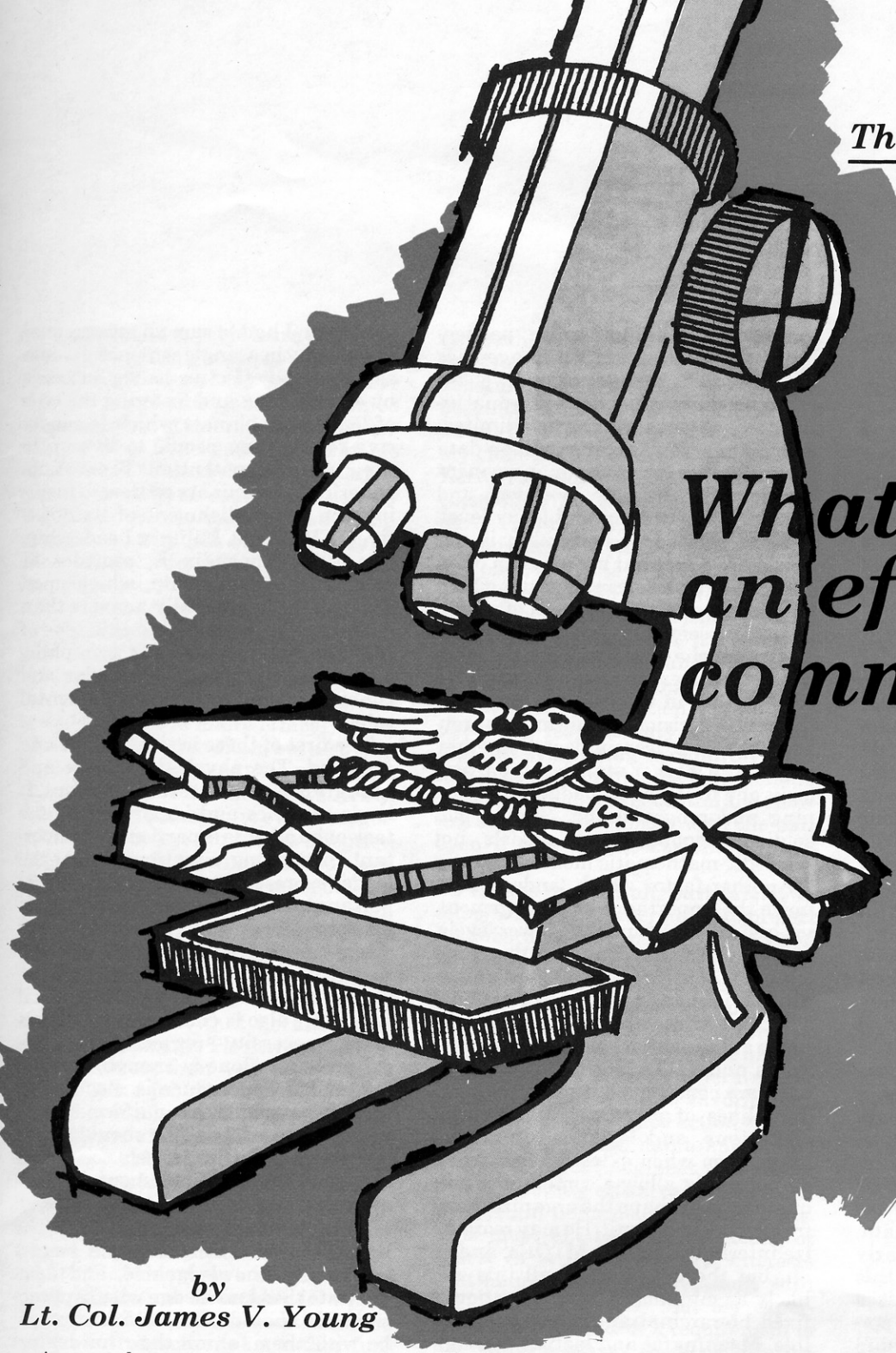
The carrot or the stick?

What makes an effective commander?



by
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Among the many professional subjects with which the contemporary military officer is concerned, few have been the object of more introspection and analysis than leadership and management. As a result, there are probably as many theories relating to what makes an effective commander, leader, or manager as there are theorists. Some provide divergent views on motivations; others cite lengthy lists of leadership principles; still others prefer to list appropriate personal characteristics of the ideal leader or manager. Within the last few years there has been a significant school of thought which favors a "scientific" approach, which insists that through quantitative analysis of statistical data, organizations can be effectively and efficiently led and managed.

It is impossible to develop an analytically sound personal philosophy of command, leadership, and management without considering these major theories. There is no shortage of advocates for either the "carrot" or the "stick" approach toward motivating people,[1] and most mid-level managers have probably been exposed to Maslow's theories on man's hierarchy of needs.[2] There are obviously salient points to be made by all concerned. In broad terms, my own philosophy might be described as that of a "Theory Y Carrot Man" who believes that properly challenged and motivated soldiers will almost always perform their duties to the highest standards. The challenge for the effective leader then is to insure that the acceptable parameters of performance are set, enforced, and fairly

administered. In other words, the commander's primary task is in setting the behavioral boundaries and professional objectives for his unit; then he must effectively use his leadership and management techniques to insure progress toward accomplishing those objectives.

At the outset, it is critical to examine the dichotomy between leadership and management. Several definitions of these terms are available, but none seem totally satisfactory.

The Army War College, for example, defines leadership as the ". . . art of influencing human behavior so as to accomplish a mission in the manner desired. . . ."[3] JCS Pub I defines management as ". . . a process of establishing and attaining objectives to carry out responsibilities." George Labovitz defines it as ". . . getting things done through other people. . . ."[4] Perhaps the most succinct and valuable discussion of the leadership-management issue is provided by BG Charles D. Bussey in his article "Leadership for the Army," *Commander's Call,* DA Pam 360-877, June 1983. General Bussey suggests that the terms leadership and management are often erroneously used virtually interchangeably, and that a more correct terminology might focus on the *personal* nature of leadership versus the *impersonal* nature of management. The *manager,* for example, often uses statistical data as the primary criteria for resource allocation, whereas the *leader* would probably use more intuitive, less quantifiable data, as the basis for a decision, particularly if it has an effect on people. Taking this a step further, I would argue that it is precisely and unequivocally this personal aspect that separates leadership from management. Management is statistical, impersonal, and conjures up visions of computers, offices, and business suits. Leadership is subjective, intuitive, and implies human interaction, field duty, and fatigues.

My own philosophy leans heavily toward this personal type of leadership model. This is not to say that leaders should not be managers, or vice versa. Clearly the two are closely related—a good leader must also be a good manager. Nor would I imply that statistics and other mathematically quantifiable indicators are not important, particularly where larger units and agencies are concerned. At the division level, for example, the commander's personal influence is obviously going to be limited; he must rely to a larger extent on data and statistics to make management decisions. At brigade, however, and certainly at battalion and lower level, personally-flavored leadership is not only more dominant but also can often play the critical role in improving both the morale and effectiveness of a unit. It would seem therefore almost axiomatic that the lower one goes the more important personal leadership becomes. Also, in the field environment, theoretical decisionmaking models probably have far less impact than they might at a higher staff level, particularly one involved in budgeting, planning and programming. Simply put, soldiers respond to role models, not scientific-mathematic models.

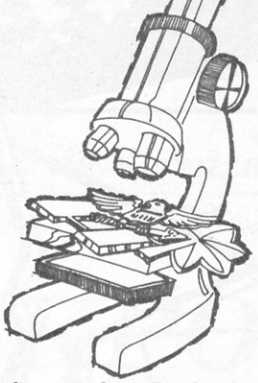
Another factor which tends to minimize the importance of management, vis-a-vis leadership at the lower levels, is a very pragmatic one. In the Army few commanders can really have a significant impact on their organizational structure. Units are organized according to authorization documents such as TOEs and TDAs. Staffs, for the most part, are constructed around the standard lines of personnel, intelligence, operations, and logistics. Command tours, even when extended to 3 years, do not really allow a commander adequate time to shape the organizational framework of his unit. He may reorganize internally, submit MTOEs, and so on, but the net effect of all this will likely be minimal. His organization is fixed, hierarchial, and generally inflexible. Meaningful and lasting managerial initiatives are difficult at best.

Does this render the commander incapable of having a real impact? Not at all—it merely limits the importance of organizational and structural change. It actually increases the criticality of leadership because it leaves the door open for the commander to expend his energies where he can have the maximum effect—by controlling and influencing his unit's environment. As Labovitz points out, this is the area which the senior manager really controls.[5]

If, then, I had to sum up my personal philosophy in a single sentence, I would say that the effective leader succeeds by establishing and fostering the type of leadership climate which is conducive to enabling people to live up to their natural potential. The "atmospherics" of a unit are critical to insuring the accomplishment of its objectives. FM 22-100, Military Leadership, Jan 1983, Appendix A, provides 11 principles of leadership, which upon close analysis are really no more than guidelines to establishing this type of command atmosphere. My own philosophy is perhaps much simpler and consists of only three fundamental rules.

The first of these is to be *visible and involved.* The physical presence and appearance of the boss is important. It lends credence and importance to the task at hand; this is particularly important in training situations where the leader's presence emphasizes the importance of the ongoing training. It also provides an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and concern. As mentioned in the article, "Tactical Command" by Arthur Collins, it is a plus if the leader also is charismatic, but this is not a necessity—normally his physical presence alone is enough.[6] In this regard his appearance is also important: for example, his uniform should be "up to speed," and he should not be overweight. The leader sets the standards, and the first fundamental standard is a sharp, military appearance.

Being involved means just that: The leader should set the example, be professionally knowledgeable, and demonstrate that knowledge when appropriate. He should train with his troops; be with them, share their hardships. Aloofness destroys credibility. This does not mean one has to live and act like a private to effectively lead, but he does need to understand his job and perspective in order to create the type of environment which will bring out his best performance. Being involved also means making decisions—hopefully they will all be wise and rational decisions, but above all make them. Indecisiveness is sometimes worse than a bad decision. In this regard, being involved also means listening, especially to subordinates. Communication is a two-



way street. I have yet to learn anything of value by talking (except occasionally that it might have been better to have kept my mouth shut), but I have gained a vast amount of information by listening. As Peter Drucker points out in his chapter on "Managerial Communications," downward communication by itself is not really communication, because it ". . . focuses only on what we want to say, not what the recipient wants to say.[7]

The second fundamental guideline of my philosophy of leadership is to *practice ethical behavior.* In many respects this may be the hardest precept to follow, not only because of the pressures to succeed, or the many ethical dilemmas encountered so often, but also simply because of the ease with which one can roll with the tide in today's Army. It is easy, for example, to state categorically that leaders must have integrity; they must back up what they say and keep their promises. They must demonstrate fairness and impartiality, particularly when administering UCMJ actions. The real dilemma, however, occurs with actual practice, often in borderline cases. Who can truthfully say, for example, that he has never taken a boondoggle TDY trip, asked for more resources than were really necessary to get a job done, or insisted on changing administrative procedures in the interest of efficiency when it was easier to just bend with the wind? Another example is aggressively spending year-end funds, often on questionable activities or projects, with the rationale that next year's budget will be cut if all of this year's money is not spent. These are situations in which the truly ethical leader must do some serious introspection at a rather fundamental level. He must consider, honestly and fairly, what has been referred to as the good of the occupational institution versus the wider society.[8] I would submit that the real litmus test for practicing ethical behavior is whether the leader's conduct reflects loyalty to the country, its constitution, and its citizens, not just loyalty to his own unit or to the Army as an institution.

The final guideline for the successful leader may be the most important: *take care of your soldier.* The leader can be visible, involved and ethically beyond reproach, yet he is not likely to create the type of climate needed unless his subordinates perceive that he has their best interests at heart. The best piece of advice for CGSC graduates in my memory came from the closing lines of Gen. Kerwin's address to the graduating class of 1978: "Never forget the soldier."[9] This means far more than making sure they are fed, clothed, sheltered and paid. It means loyalty, both up and down the chain of command, but especially down. It means fairness, impartiality and keeping faith. It means promoting self-confidence and self-esteem. It means positive reinforcement, encouragement, recognition. It means emphasizing responsiblity and allowing (not just demanding or requiring) soldiers to be accountable for their actions. It means avoiding over-control and allowing subordinates to run with the ball, even if they may occasionally make mistakes.

Perhaps most of all, particularly in today's army, a leader needs to protect his subordinates from unnecessary and trivial requirements. Units, and the people in them, must focus on the goal, the objective. Unnecessary or peripheral requirements need to be buffered or "deflected" by the leader. I once had the pleasure of working for a general officer in the Pentagon whose favorite guidance to newly assigned action officers was to, ". . . avoid dumb and stupid things." I would augment this advice by encouraging effective leaders to actively fight nonsensical requirements. This must not be done to excess, of course (it is in his soldiers' interests that he maintain good relations with higher headquarters), but my experience has been that if a requirement is not really necessary, it will usually disappear if someone in authority aggressively questions its usefulness.

In developing a personal philosophy of leadership one can apply some elements of the major theories and determine their applicability to their own brand of leadership. From a broad perspective, however, this will probably be only partially successful, not because certain elements are not worthwhile or relative, but simply because it should be obvious that command, leadership, and management are very personal things. What works for one person may not work for another. In the final analysis, however, it is critical only that each individual determines his own path toward creating an atmosphere that will insure that whatever unit or agency he may be involved with will receive his best shot at providing competent and effective executive direction.

Endnotes

[1] An excellent article on human motivation is Herzberg, Frederick. *Work and the Nature of Man.* Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1966. Chapter 6: "The Motivation-Hygiene Theory."

[2] See Elbing, Alvar O., Jr. *Behavioral Decisions in Organizations.* Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1970, pp. 366-382. "A Theory of Human Motivation," by Abraham Maslow.

[3] Directive, Subcourse M-1 "The Professional," Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa, p. 3.

[4] Labovitz, George H. "Management: An Organizational Overview," Army War College Lecture, 14 Dec 1978.

[5] Labovitz.

[6] Collins, Arthur S., Jr. "Tactical Command," *Parameters,* Vol. 8, September 1978, pp. 78-86.

[7] Drucker, Peter F. *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices.* New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

[8] Sarkesian, Sam G. and Gannon, Thomas M. "Introduction: Professionalism—Problems and Challenges." *American Behavioral Scientist,* Vol. 19, May-June, 1976, pp. 495-510.

[9] Kerwin, Walter T., Jr. "An Old Soldier Speaks." *Military Review,* Vol. 59, March 1979, pp. 40-43.

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