

Commanding the strategic Signal company

SPRIT
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LEADERSHIP

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by Capt. Patrick R. Faure

Command equals leadership. This axiom, used as a banner by many commanders, has reduced the act of command in the mind of many to a somewhat simplistic concept. The great majority of officers and noncommissioned officers of the strategic communications field not only recognize that leadership is indeed basic to command, but also must rely on precise managerial skills, sound logistic concepts and knowledge, technical understanding of Signal equipment, and the art of establishing and maintaining a good and active relationship with the supported commands. Proposed in this manner, the equation of command is certainly more complete. The objective of this essay is to understand the process which can help in the solving of the equation.

The great quantity of works which have been written about leadership is of little help to the commander stranded in the middle of the raging waves of an uncohesive unit. One of the effective ways to calm the storm is to make a bigger wave than those assailing him. The first one comes on the day of the change of command. All the site chiefs come to the ceremony and, after the mandatory reception, are invited to a site chief meeting with the new commander at a precise time. No tardiness can be tolerated at all on this first encounter,

for any tolerance will start a slide into abuse and nonchalance. The first need of the commander—who had the time to evaluate his company, individual sites, NCOs and soldiers during the inventory—must be to set standards. These standards cannot be improvised: they must be thought of weeks in advance, properly formulated for all to understand and perform. Their main purpose is for the leadership of the unit to grasp the general orientation of the commander, as well as his obvious goals. For each commander, at company level, should know what he wants his new unit to accomplish before accepting the guidon. If he does not know what goals he wants to achieve, he should be honest enough not to accept any command. An example of standards, of which there can be up to forty, is: "I will never accept a late deadline." But the commander must realize that he must be ready and willing to back up his words with actions. Because the first thing a good NCO will do is test how valid these affirmations are. Of course one site chief will have a late report. In this case, he will have to report to the commander with the completed report. This will involve in most cases a long drive, a hastily finished report, an oral reprimand, and, most of all, a confrontation which will turn into a defeat for the site chief. The commander must attack at all times and must always win, especially in the beginning. Therefore, we can further break down the elements of leadership: thorough

analysis of a given situation, thoughtful consideration of all feasible solutions, moral courage, uncompromising integrity, discipline, magnanimity in the application of reprimand or punishment, and undeterable determination. A follow-up element of the first meeting is to never let the standards slip. They must be written down, and always referred to, improved upon, and made more demanding. They should never be made easier to meet. At the same time, the pet peeves of the commander must be made public and enforced, sometimes ruthlessly (in my case, one of them was not accepting lateness to meetings).

Leadership also means being in charge of the company, at all levels, and particularly at battalion and brigade. When incidents happen, and they will happen—regardless of how good a commander is—the only proper method is to hit the battalion commander head-on. Call immediately. Relate the situation, and tell what you are doing about it. Never give the battalion commander the opportunity to take the offensive. The company commander must always stay at least one step ahead. Inspections of the sites are, therefore, of paramount importance and platoon leaders, NCOs and the commander himself must learn how to inspect and inspect in an extremely detailed manner.

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An unfortunate correlation by which to judge leadership is the number of at-fault GOV accidents and security violations which occur in a unit. This is a statistical judgement which is many times misused, and of which I am emphatically critical. One reason is that these numbers are never compared relatively to the number of miles driven or the number of classified documents handled by a unit. Nevertheless, there are means to curb them. If a vehicle is not driven, it cannot have an accident: consequently, cutting down the number of trips, doubling up and using alternate means decrease the risk of accidents. Aggressive safety briefings, drivers' training and positive reinforcement are useful in reducing accidents. As for security violations, checking the flow of classified documents, the shape of the COMSEC accounts, the knowledge of operators, the proper application of procedures and the quality of training given to newly arrived soldiers are the only ways to help prevent security violations. This demands that the commander make the effort to learn COMSEC and security procedures. Furthermore, when violations happen, accidentally or negligently, the price to pay in terms of administrative or punitive measures must be made unbearably high. Finally, soldiers and NCOs must be made to ponder about how, why, when and what in the future. This is accomplished by having them write their answers in a formatted letter to the commander.

Managerial skills are learned. They are acquired before command through books and practice, or through practice after taking the command. In our case, I recommend managing by objectives which are established quarterly and are tangible, measurable objectives. Let's review an example of poorly formulated objectives and one of good objectives. When a commander writes as an objective, "Establish a viable chain of concern," it means nothing. First, no one in the unit knows what a "chain of concern" is, even less, what a viable one is. Secondly, there is no way to measure this. Should the NCO

happen to know what a chain of concern is, it is not tangible and, therefore, cannot be objectively evaluated. On the other hand, a good objective can be formulated: "Availability rate for all generators will be 97% for the quarter: this translates to no more than 2 days down-time on any generator during the next 90 days." This objective is tangible, measurable, explained in clear terms and understandable to all. Of course, the objective needs to be enforced during the time period and constantly monitored, with immediate feedback to the NCOs. Once again, help from the company headquarters must be available at all times and encourages the meeting of the objectives by the site chief. This emphasis on feedback and progress monitoring justifies even more the need of measurable objectives. The objectives are reviewed once a month and new objectives distributed in writing to all NCOs and lieutenants each quarter. At this time, the objectives of the previous quarter are discussed and evaluation given as to the achievements of the company as a whole. Sites with the best results should also be distinguished at that time.

In the strategic communications field, several senior officers stated during my command that "operations will not get you relieved, supply accountability will." Following the advice of this axiom, I became extremely familiar with supply operations and went as far as taking over the property book myself because I found it preposterous to take one of my two brand new second lieutenants and make him PBO. This action allows the commander to keep complete control over logistics and to have a much more responsive supply section. Once again, setting the standards and reorganization are the key elements. Furthermore, proper logistics entail proper accountability, and periodic checks are mandatory. Therefore, I am opposed to a one shot

100% accountability check once a year, and think that the 25% per quarter method is more efficient and results in better awareness, for until the fourth quarter, no one knows which site will be involved in the inventory. On top of this, during alerts, a site can be picked at random and given a 100% inventory on the day of the alert. In the field of logistics, like in any other, command emphasis will generate results. Unlike any other field, however, only intimate knowledge of AR 710-2 and DA PAM 710-2-1 (to name only two publications) will allow the commander to master supply. Unfortunately, many captains have a very shallow knowledge of these publications and never even imagine the intricacy of their company supply operations. If they're unable to understand them, they certainly cannot manage them.

The major difference between supply and operations is that if operations fail, the result will be immediate, much as when one breaks a leg. The pain is instantaneous, and corrective action ensues within moments. Supply deficiencies are more like a cancer, insidious, and for the most part painless, until they are large enough to kill the patient. Therefore, although technical knowledge of Signal equipment in the strategic field is important, the commander cannot effectively command a company relying simply on technical understanding of the equipment. The best time to get this understanding is during either the inventory or the first days of command. Understanding gained at a later date will categorize the commander as someone who has been in command for X number of weeks and still doesn't know anything "we" are doing. In my opinion, inventory time is much more profitably used if understanding is gained during the inventory: first of all, count the items; when the count is finished, while the site chief updates the hand receipt, another NCO can give the new commander a tour of the facility. Again, in operations, the S-3 officer (usually a more senior and experienced captain) can be of great

**Thomas Jefferson on leadership:
God grant that men of principle shall be our
principal men.**

help in explaining to the commander exactly what his company does. In this manner, explanations, ignorance and weak points stay at captain level and no embarrassment results of the conversation. It is to be emphasized that unlike a tactical Signal company, the amount of management involved in the operations section of the strategic company is somewhat limited and often handled at battalion level.

The last element of the command equation is relationship with the supported commands. It is my belief that the customer is always right, and a company that believes in this axiom can establish a much better rapport with its customers. However, it does not mean the customer will always win, but he must certainly always have the feeling of winning. The strategic Signal company commander should, in his role of area signal representative, routinely make the effort of meeting every one of his major supported customers and visit them an average of once every six months. It is unnecessary to ponder how ignorant the customers are of Signal, for the Signal officer is in general ignorant of what the customer does. It is during those meetings that the commander should learn about his customers, analyze their needs, and come up with better Signal systems. Failure to accomplish these minimum requirements can only result in the customer eventually bypassing the Signal company to reach the more visible Signal battalion. And this would give the initiative to the battalion commander.

Many aspects of command are left out of this essay, most significantly the human element: relationship with staff and sister company commanders. These are extremely complex relations which go beyond the scope of this essay, but do touch on the problem of motivation. One way I motivated the soldiers was to have a site of the year competition. Specific categories were established which were inspected and graded during my site visits. Motivation and morale soared to an all time high, and many positive results were obtained

from such. It constantly challenged sites to improve their standards in maintenance, training, security, property accountability, operations, site appearance and leadership. It was further integrated in a series of mini-ARTEP's I conducted on each site and during which individual soldiers were recognized for their outstanding performance. However, as time went by, the competition became old, and sites at the bottom of the scale of rating started giving up any hope of being in the top five. This, of course, led to a reevaluation and modification in the site of the year program. And it points out another important fact: whatever programs, changes and objectives are implemented, they cannot be taken for granted. Methods which brought excellent results in March, may be disastrous in August. This is why commanding a company will always be an incredibly rewarding challenge. A company is before all a human organization. The company commander is the agent who brings life to this organization. He has several senior and excellent NCOs to help him in this mission, and each company, just as each individual, will respond differently to the same treatment.

Nevertheless, some axioms can be deduced from experience, and any disregard of these axioms will bring the downfall of the commander. The qualities required of a commander are many and varied. Each commander does not possess them all, for some of them are innate. But it behooves him to make the necessary effort to acquire those that he can. No commander can be successful without an all around knowledge of fundamental Army programs like supply, safety, security and COMSEC.

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