

What Leadership Is Not
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Dedicated to
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In the last twenty years I have read several dozen articles and books on leadership. Many were based on the leadership principles taught with great success throughout the U.S. military. Some were based on corporate models (used by Consulting Firms) that are allegedly customized to fit the needs of law enforcement. Still others were written by people with little or no field experience, but with lots of education. No matter what source that those concepts were derived from, each explained what, in the writer's opinion, makes a good leader. For the most part these publications were well written, informative and, unfortunately, awfully repetitive. It appears that there are only so many ways to tell a person that they should: (a) lead by example; (b) make sound and timely decisions; and (c) know the strengths and weaknesses of themselves and their teams. Oddly enough, even with all the material that I have read and studied concerning leadership, I have yet to read a book or an article that explained what leadership is *not*. Perhaps this is because people that are smarter than me believe that police officers are intelligent enough to figure that part out. But if this is true, if the law enforcement community understands all facets of leadership, then why do we have so many problems with leadership issues and why do we keep repeating the same leadership mistakes?

I am going to digress a moment and address that last question in the above paragraph. The answer to this dilemma is found in our present-day promotion/appointment system. The current method of assigning leadership positions (and promotions) is based exclusively on the virtue of seniority, education, test scores, popularity, the skill to sell oneself to a promotion board and the ability to do administrative-work. *Not the ability to actually lead men and women in the field.* It is only recent history that law enforcement has finally began to recognize the need for leadership training for those seeking (or receiving) promotions and/or appointments to critical positions. The downfall of *these* new programs is in the timing. By the time officers receive necessary leadership training, they have often already been cops for up to a decade or more. If a newly promoted person has weak or poor leadership skills to begin with, those weak or poor skills are going to be exacerbated by command responsibilities and no amount of short term training can help change that fact. Even those attending the elite FBI National Academy come to the training far too late in their careers to truly benefit from the *leadership training* they receive there. Before people get upset and misconstrue what I just said – especially those that have attended the National FBI Academy – let me explain that I believe the training provided by National FBI Academy in areas such as management science, behavioral science, law, communications, forensic science and health/fitness is absolutely priceless. But I must reiterate that I also believe the *leadership training* they receive comes far too late for those that could benefit from it the most. A weak leader attending the National FBI Academy (or training like it)

will still be a weak leader when he/she graduates from the program – he/she will just have a better, more thorough looking resume.

Back to the original subject of what leadership is not. My list of what leadership is *not* is based on my three decades of leadership experience (I give a brief overview of that experience at the conclusion of this article). This list outlines mistakes in leadership that I have personally made and some are leadership mistakes that I have watched others make. Included in this list are also assumptions about leadership that have become commonly accepted and are therefore accepted as truths in law enforcement and, to some degree, the U.S. military.

The principles of what leadership is not!

- i. *A leader is not the same thing as a manager/supervisor.* Many people in corporate America and law enforcement confuse this point. Law enforcement does not, as a rule, use the term ‘manager’; however, we do use the word ‘supervisor’ in its place. There is a vast difference between a leader and a manager/supervisor. A person manages an office (and its assets) and supervises people in an administrative manner. A crisis situation where people are dying and bullets are flying requires swift and dynamic leadership in the field – not managers or supervisors sitting behind a desk. Law enforcement spends far too much time developing supervisors and far too little time developing leaders.
- ii. *Leadership theory is not always field-reality.* Often invented by people with little or no military or law enforcement field experience, leadership theories (or models) come and go with a frequency that coincides with every graduating class of PhDs. Often used for social experimentation, law enforcement and the U.S. military must endure new leadership theories that are usually based on everyone holding hands and singing feel-good-songs. All this works just fine until reality strikes home and the shooting starts. Then, and only then, these theories – that were garbage anyway – get put in the toilet and flushed. What inventors of such drivel fail to understand is that the true principles of leadership – that actually work – are time tested and written in people’s blood.
- iii. *Leadership is not a birthright.* The notion of leadership by birthright has caused problems throughout world history. Sadly, contemporary law enforcement and the U.S. military still occasionally fall victim to this idiocy. How so? How often have you heard stories about a General (or a Chief of police) whose son or daughter is given a choice assignment that enhances his/her career simply because of their last name? Ninety-nine percent of all second or third generation law enforcement (or military) personnel make their own successful careers without anyone’s help; however, there is always that one percent that requires a *great deal of assistance*. Those that get such help are usually incompetent in everything they do – but again, because of a family name or a long standing service heritage they receive preferential treatment. Unfortunately, the positions

these buffoons are rewarded with are often critical and require strong leadership skills which they do not have – to the detriment of every one else.

- iv. *Leadership is not holier-than-thou.* This subject is very touchy for most leaders. It requires a great deal of self examination that usually leads to the realization that many “leaders” live by the standard of “do as I say – not as I have done or as I do!” If a leader is going to hold his/her people to high standards; then that leader must meet and exceed those same standards. A leader cannot preach morals, ethics and responsibility and expect his/her charges to unquestionably follow that guidance if he/she *does not live by those same rules.*
- v. *Academic education does not a leader make.* I sincerely believe that higher levels of education are a desired quality in leaders. Desired; but not mandatory. I also believe that there is a misperception in law enforcement that higher levels of education automatically qualify a person to be a leader; specifically a Chief of police. An academic (or book learning) education does help, but it does not give a person any *special* advantage. For instance, some of the greatest military leaders I have ever known were service academy (West Point) graduates. Conversely, some of the very worst military leaders I have ever known were service academy graduates. Point being, the service academies teach leadership to the cadets the entire four years of their academic and military education; yet an academy education does not guarantee *success* as a military leader.

So how does this translate to law enforcement? Here’s an example: Several years ago an outstanding SWAT/tactical sergeant took the lieutenants’ exam for his department. The sergeant had, time and again, proven himself to be a highly capable leader – many times under the *worst* of circumstances. For the last ten years, he had commanded an extremely successful 20 man tactical unit on dozens of hazardous deployments. During the exam process, he did *very well* on the written portion and nailed the assessment board; however, he lost the promotion to another sergeant. The other sergeant had less skill and leadership experience and had never been tested during a real critical incident; but he did have a college education while the initial sergeant did not. What I am trying to drive home is that under the current system of advancement in law enforcement, leadership skills and experience count for almost nothing – while a formal academic education counts for almost everything. We have highly skilled leaders in the field being passed over for promotions and leadership positions simply because of a lack of a formal academic education. This is a supreme waste of talent!

- vi. *Leadership capability is not rank specific.* There is a wide-spread belief in law enforcement that when a person gets promoted to a leadership position, they automatically become a good leader. This thought is not only delusional, it is downright dangerous for those officers that must take orders from such a person.

The U.S military solved this problem long ago by developing the professional Non Commissioned Officers (NCO) corps. Starting at the rank of E-4 (an Army / Marine Corps – Corporal) the NCO’s primary job is to supervise, mentor and lead subordinates and, if you eventually become a Platoon Sergeant (Army / Marine Corps – E5 to E7), your job also includes mentoring the new 2nd Lieutenant who is technically your boss. Because commissioned officers (Lieutenants and above) come and go, the professional NCO has become the backbone of the U.S. Military – especially in leadership. One thing that I should also mention is that from the earliest days in boot camp – regardless of the branch of service – recruits with strong leadership potential and aptitude are watched and tagged for greater levels of responsibility as they progress in rank.

Law enforcement has not been so intuitive. The first real *leadership* position for most police departments in America starts at the rank of sergeant. Some departments do have the rank of corporal; however, most cities (such as the city of Dallas, Texas), see this rank as more of a pay-grade/administrative promotion rather than a first level leadership position. Therefore, in the city of Dallas (as with most police departments across the U.S.), there are no intermediate leadership positions and therefore no *leadership training* offered between the ranks of patrol officer and sergeant. Because of this fact, newly promoted sergeants have no experience to base leadership decisions on and are, for the most part, left to stumble around in the dark trying to figure out what leadership means – that is, if they even know they should care.

- vii. *Leadership is not natural.* People that have a high degree of charisma are often mistaken for natural leaders, when in reality there is no such thing as a natural born leader. There *are* people that have an innate ability to *grasp* leadership *principles* more quickly than others; however, regardless of this talent, young leaders must still be trained and mentored. Our society is constantly fooled (by politicians, actors and athletes) into believing that they, the articulate charismatic personality, are leaders.
- viii. *Leadership is not a popularity contest.* This principle is violated when a person in a leadership position attempts to be popular or ingratiate him/her self with their subordinates. The reason for the old axiom “it’s lonely at the top” is because leaders cannot afford to allow their charges to be *overly* familiar with them. Why? Because familiarity could eventually breed contempt for the leader. In other words, the troops know the leader far too well and might share some of his/her dirty laundry. Does this mean that a leader cannot be friends with his/her subordinates? No, not at all. But it does mean he/she should be very careful about it.
- ix. *Leadership is not a democracy.* Before people blow a gasket at this one, let me say that a wise leader seeks input from his/her subordinates. But asking or soliciting for ideas does not mean that there should be a vote on the decision. The final decision belongs to the

designated leader and that person alone. This might sound overly militaristic or authoritarian, and in some regards it is; however, most situations that call for strong leadership do not allow for a lot of planning, talking and/or worrying about the sensitive nature of other people.

- x. *A leadership position does not automatically mean respect.* This is a mistake that has been made by leaders since before the Romans conquered the known world. And it is still happening today. Some leaders seem to think that by *virtue of their rank* or position, they are respected by their troops/officers. They mistake the required deference they are shown for their rank or position as respect. Everyday a leader goes to work he/she must earn respect from his/her subordinates.

That's my list of what leadership is not. Without a doubt there are probably dozens of more points that could be listed here, but based on my experience, those are my favorites. Since I have given you my list of *leadership not's*, I feel compelled to also give you my list of what leadership is. I'll not rewrite the military's principles of leadership – that's been done enough times already – though I sincerely believe all leaders (new and old) should have them memorized and/or engraved on their foreheads. Anyway, here's my short list of what leadership (or being a leader) means to me.

The True Leader.

- *A True Leader* is responsible for his/her actions and conduct at all times. General Robert E. Lee said it best; “*A person that is not in control of their own actions and deeds cannot possibly be expected to lead others.*” The second part of this is that a true leader is also responsible for the successes *and the failures* of his/her team. Far too often false leaders are willing to take credit for something good but when something bad happens they immediately pass it off as being the fault of their subordinates. While this might have appeased city leaders and the media, this poor display of leadership and loyalty destroys any faith and confidence that the rank and file had for this person.
- Leadership is an evolutionary process. Leadership capability changes and grows only with time and great effort. As a person matures, so should his/her leadership style. The wise young leader finds people with greater leadership skills to emulate. And in time, if he/she is found worthy, will also be emulated by his/her subordinates.
- A true leader will not lie, cheat or steal, nor tolerate those that do. I am constantly amazed at how often leaders (false leaders actually) get caught lying, cheating and literally stealing from others. Especially elected officials! The irony is that so many of them had, at one time, some very good leadership talent. Do not confuse this intolerance for corruption by a leader as being holier-than-thou. In this case, the true leader is always willing to walk the talk.

- True leadership is synonymous with mentorship. There are many leaders that do not understand this point. They fail to understand that they are responsible for mentoring and teaching the next generation of leaders. Mentorship means being a good example, giving formal and informal guidance, counseling and even punishment when and where it is needed. A true leader has no greater charge than mentoring his/her followers. Some police departments (and civilian organizations) offer *academic courses* that are designed to teach the newly promoted leadership skills; however, this is not the same thing as mentorship. It is an *excellent starting point*, but literally forging a person into a good leader takes years of hard work. Also, it can only be accomplished by a mentor with field experience that lives the code of a true leader.
- A True Leader is a courageous person. There are many different kinds of courage such as that shown by police officers or soldiers in combat or a shootout. It takes an enormous amount of courage for a SWAT officer to go through a door knowing that the suspect on the other side is waiting to kill him. Yes, those are examples of courage, but those examples are not the type of courage I speak of. When I say that a true leader is a courageous person, I mean that he/she always has the courage to do the right thing. This is the greatest kind of courage because it comes with no good recognition, no medals or plaques. Often times displaying such courage leaves the True Leader bruised and beaten down and sometimes unemployed.

Conclusion. As promised, I will briefly describe some of my own leadership background. It will help explain this article and why I am so passionate and opinionated about leadership issues.

Over the last three decades I have held the military leadership positions of fire team leader, squad-leader, Special Ops team leader, platoon sergeant, platoon leader and acting company commander. In law enforcement I have held the leadership positions of SWAT team leader and tactical commander. Outside of SWAT I have also held the rank of Chief Deputy Constable. During those decades I have watched good people have their careers smashed and destroyed, or worse, die in the line of duty because of incompetent and/or corrupt people in leadership positions. In this article I have named those people *False Leaders*, because in fact, that is what they are. Conversely, also during my years of service, I have had the honor and the privilege to work for some incredible leaders. I name these people *True Leaders*, because they exemplify the best traits found in leadership today. I have dedicated this article to three of the very finest:

Major Edward Lacey, U.S Army (Ret). I met Major Lacey at the Infantry Officers Basic Course in 1984 when I was a 2nd Lieutenant and he was a tactical officer (a Captain) in charge of mentoring the infantry trainee platoon I was a member of. Besides learning how to lead an infantry platoon – which was no small task – I learned from Major Ed Lacey that I could be a fierce warrior and still maintain my faith in God, our Country and myself. And in that, he taught me that the greatest attribute of a *True Leader* is his own faith.

Doug Kowalski, Chief of Police, McKinney Texas. Chief Kowalski was my Tactical Commander when I was assigned to the Dallas Police Department's Tactical Division (SWAT). I learned from Chief Kowalski that there is a difference between having personal courage and being a courageous leader. On the front of his desk was taped a simple paper sign that read, "Always have the courage to do the right thing." It is my belief that Chief Doug Kowalski lives his life by that high code of honor. It is one of the most important lessons I carry in my heart.

Jon Owen, Director of Public Safety, Palmer Alaska. Many years ago Jon and I worked the same shift as rookie officers in south Dallas. On occasion, Jon and I got to ride together as partners and, even though we were both rookies, I learned a lot from Jon. Jon is not your stereotypical cop; he is unassuming, non-intimidating and very soft spoken. The biggest mistake I saw a criminal make was thinking Jon, because of his size and humble personality, would not fight. What I learned from Jon (many times over) is that in a quiet gentle nature there is often the dignified strength of a warrior *and* a True Leader.

These three men are good and honorable *True Leaders*. I have been richly blessed to have been mentored by them. I can only hope that *I* have lived up to their expectations of me and that one day, someone I have mentored will name me a *True Leader*.

In closing, I ask readers to bear in mind these last few things; (1) If you are a leader or in a leadership position your officers/troops are watching and learning from your every action – both the good *and* the bad; (2) Your officers/troops will emulate your actions – both good *and* bad; and (3) Remember, law enforcement desperately needs more *True Leaders*; we have enough *False Leaders* as it is!

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The son of a career military officer, Mike spent 12 years on active duty as a noncommissioned and commissioned officer (mostly carrying a rifle, rubber boat, and dive equipment running up and down the beaches of sunny California). In 1988 Mike left the military and joined the Dallas Police Department. While with Dallas, Mike became a highly decorated officer serving as a patrolman and as a Tactical officer (SWAT). Mike's tenure with Dallas ended after a severe line of duty injury forced him into early retirement. Currently, Mike is co-owner of Charlie-Mike Enterprises, Inc. that specializes in teaching Basic and Advanced SWAT schools, Hostage Rescue training and Counter Paramilitary Operations courses. Mike can be contacted at (972) 291-7809 or at Charlie-Mike Enterprise, Inc. New website is www.CMESWAT.com.