

The Relationship Between Enlisted and Officers

Part 2: Developing the T-Shape culture

by Capt Jeremy Carter & 1stSgt Thomas Ochoa

In 1920, Gen Lejeune stated that “the relation between officers and enlisted men should in no sense be that of superior and inferior nor that of master and servant, but rather that of teacher and scholar. In fact, it should partake of the nature of the relation between father and son, to the extent that officers, especially commanders, are responsible for the physical, mental, and moral welfare, as well as the discipline and military training of the men under their command who are serving the Nation in the Marine Corps.”¹ This statement is especially true regarding the newly arrived Marines from their MOS school since they are extremely impressionable early on in their Marine Corps careers. As stated by our 13th Commandant, Gen Lejeune, “These men are in the formative period of their lives and officers owe it to them, to their parents, and to the Nation, that when discharged from the service they should be far better men physically, mentally, and morally than they were when they enlisted.”

As stated in the forward of *Sustaining the Transformation*, “Our Corps does two things for America: we make Marines and we win our nation’s battles. Our ability to successfully accomplish the latter, of course, depends upon how well we do the former. We make Marines through a process called transformation. During this process, we change young men’s and women’s lives forever by imbuing them with our nation’s highest ideals.”²

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The pride these young men and women have upon graduating basic training and earning the title Marine is impressive. Thomas Ricks dedicated an entire book (*Making the Corps*) to the process and transformation. However, all too

In the first article ... the T-Shape Philosophy was introduced.

often, these young Marines’ pride and transformation are damaged by poor leadership early on in their careers.

This article is the second part of a two-part series on developing the optimal relationship between enlisted and officers. In the first article, the concept of the T-Shape Philosophy was introduced. The T-Shape Philosophy describes a concept for the optimal relationship between enlisted and officer, where the officer’s role is to have a

greater width in knowledge than their enlisted counterpart, the enlisted role is to have a greater depth of knowledge than their officer, and the staff non-commissioned officers’ (SNCO) role is to be the bridge between the subject-matter experts (SMEs) and the officer.

This article will describe how to develop the optimal culture regarding the T-Shape Philosophy. The reader should note that there is a difference between a philosophy and a culture. A philosophy is merely words, but a culture is what truly matters since the culture is the unwritten norms and rules of an organization. When one is to look back upon the Marine Corps’ history in our larger-than-life battles such as Belleau Wood, the Pacific Campaign, or the Chosin Reservoir, one can easily deduce that the Marine Corps’ culture, not philosophy, facilitated battlefield success. The subsequent sections of this article will describe how to develop this culture in Marines both up and down the chain of command.

Recommendations for the Junior Marines

As a junior Marine, the most important thing you can do for your relationship with your officer is develop trust. Establishing a baseline of trust begins by consistently executing the 3 Ls (i.e., never be late, never be light, and never be last). Meaning be on time, have the prescribed gear, and do not fall out of training. If the junior Marine can do the 3 Ls, then they are off to fulfilling the requirement to be a good Marine.

Additionally, an individual Marine, a fire team, or a squad cannot be trusted without internal discipline and therefore must be controlled versus commanded. In his book, *Extreme Ownership*, Jocko Willink repeatedly states that “discipline equals freedom.”³ Discipline is a bare minimum and a pre-requisite for an average unit, much less a good, or preferred, great unit. In the absence of internal discipline, meaning a Marine doing the right thing the right way for the right reason without being forced, leaders have to apply external discipline, such as early showtimes, random gear inspections, restrictive orders, no mutual ownership of the unit, etc. A unit that relies on external discipline is slower, has less initiative, more susceptible to mistakes, and unable to effectively impose its will on the enemy.

Our Corps does not need average Marines. Rather, we need great Marines, and the Corps has a history of junior Marines making a difference. This difference has been shown time and time again in battle, such as LCpl Brady Gustafson. LCpl Gustafson (2d Platoon, Company G, 2/7 Mar) returned accurate heavy fire against a numerically superior enemy in Afghanistan, despite an RPG severing his right leg. For LCpl Gustafson’s heroic and selfless actions, he earned the Navy Cross and was meritoriously promoted to corporal on 27 March 2009.

Lastly, the junior Marines must be on a continual pursuit to master the motor skills and knowledge of their MOS. For example, in the infantry, the junior 0311 needs to be able to conduct magazine reloads faster than their officer. According to Daniel Pink, in his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About*

What Motivates Us, mastery of a skill comes with pain (deliberate practice is not fun and is challenging), it is asymptomatic (it takes more practice with diminishing returns to get better as one improves their skill), and requires the correct mindset (embraces challenge).⁴ As the junior Marines increase their mo-

tions high and try to exceed them.”⁶ It is a simple concept; if you have low expectations for your young Marines, they will meet your expectations, but the opposite is also true. If you set high expectations, even if they do not fully meet them, the unit will be better for having tried. However, if the unit does

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tor skills and ability to execute the orders of their non-commissioned officers (NCOs), they need to be concurrently increasing their knowledge of their profession as they prepare for a leadership role in the Marine Corps.

Recommendations for the Officer

For the officer, the most important thing you can do for your relationship with your junior Marine is set the example. If your junior Marines must abide by the 3 Ls, you most certainly must abide by them, but exponentially more. Your junior Marines will be looking at you always, and you must always be beyond reproach. As stated by Gen Lejeune, “Young Marines respond quickly and readily to the exhibition of qualities of leadership on the part of their officers. Each officer must endeavor by all means in his power to develop within himself those qualities of leadership, including industry, justice, self-control, unselfishness, honor, and courage, which will fit him to be a real leader of men.”⁵

As the officer, you primarily work through your NCOs for developing your junior Marines. The NCOs will drive day-to-day operations and lead, mentor, and develop the junior Marines. However, as their officer, you should set high expectations and provide them with opportunities for leadership and ownership of the unit. In the book, *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About The Business of Life*, James Kerr says, “Successful leaders have internal benchmarks. They set their expecta-

not meet the expectations, the leadership must address the issue by determining what went wrong (unrealistic goal, competing interest, poor planning, bad execution, etc.) and what they will do to address the issue.

In the book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell shows that the one thing all successful people have in common is that they had the opportunity to develop their skills early on in their careers.⁷ An example of providing an opportunity for a junior Marine is to have them teach a class on equipment, such as a night vision device, or a simple technique class, such as emplacing sandbags correctly. Their NCO will conduct rehearsals with them and the junior Marine will be responsible for understanding the equipment fully before giving the class to the platoon. It is important to remember that Marines want to be challenged and that every Marine wants ownership within the unit. Table 1 (on following page) displays a basic template for ensuring Marines have the opportunity to possess ownership of the platoon as well as the ability to develop their leadership and teaching skills.

The Relationship Between Non-Commissioned Officers and the Officer

At the platoon level, the NCO should have a direct line of communication with the platoon commander, while keeping their SNCO informed. The relationship between the NCO and officer should be that of loyal dissent, meaning that the NCO can disagree

	Weapons	Optics	Techniques, Tactics, & Procedures	Movement	Communicate	USMC History
Junior Marines	-M4 -M27 -M203 -M320 -M67	-PAS 28 -PAS 13G -PVS-24 -PVS-27 -PVS-17C -PVS-13D -RCO -SDO -PEQ 16	-7-sandbag fighting position -Sector Stakes -Hasty fighting position -Two-man fighting position -Fire and Movement -Danger area crossings	-Compass -Pace Count -Determine the error in a lensatic compass	-PRC 152 -PRC 153 -PRC 117G -PRC 117F -PRC 150 -Hand and Arm signals	-Belleauwood -Guadalcanal -Tarawa -Peleliu -Iwo Jima -Okinawa -Inchon -Chosin Reservoir -Khe Sahn
NCO Marines	-M249 -M240 -AT-4 -LAAW -M32 -M9 -Claymore	-Vector -DAGR -LBS -Collimator -PSQ 18/ GLS	-Call for Fore- Grid, Polar, Shift -Immediate Action Drills -Hasty Attack -Occupy Support by Fire -Breach an Obstacle -Clear a trench -Detainee handling -Secure a LZ	-Map Work -Develop a Map Overlay -Navigate with a map and compass -Navigate with terrain association -How to pack a ruck	-SPACES Kit -Field Expedient Antennae -Landing zone brief - MEDEVAC 9-line -IED Report	-Banana Wars -Soissons -Saint-Mihiel -Navajo Code Talker -Combined Action Platoons -Grenada -Panama -Forward Operating Base Rhino

Table 1.

with the officer behind closed doors. The Marine Corps does not need or deserve yes-men in her NCO ranks. This type of relationship is possible only with trust. An NCO who is above reproach on and off duty will easily gain the trust of their platoon commander.

The officer should create an adoration toward themselves by, as mentioned earlier, being beyond reproach. This adoration is not to say that the NCO wishes to be an officer; rather, it means that they wish to follow the example set by their commander and live up to their expectations and not let the officer down. To achieve this effect, the officer must of course be worthy of adoration and emulation, which is a burden but the utmost privilege. Both the NCO and the commanding officer must strive to be their absolute best because that is what the junior Marines deserve. As described in greater detail later, both the NCO and the officer should seek the advice of the SNCO. The SNCO has the experience of having served in multiple units and has been a junior Marine, small unit leader, and in some cases, a platoon commander.

Recommendations for the NCO

For the NCO, the single most

important thing you can do is develop, coach, and mentor your subordinates. An NCO with an efficient, well-disciplined unit begins to develop the trust and confidence of their commander. Similar to other levels of leadership, you will need to train your unit to operate seamlessly and eventually operate on implicit communication rather than explicit commands. The first, and arguably most important step, comes from the example you set. You must be the first to rise and last to sleep in your team or squad. As an NCO, you should continually strive so that your officer and SNCO never beat you at anything. Constantly strive to be the best in all the domains necessary for your profession, since you are the first link in the leadership chain, and it cannot be weak.

This concept is simply applying the second Marine Corps leadership principle (know yourself and seek self-improvement). Lastly, look to the command for development and seek it out if necessary. Your officer will provide you with a mission statement and commander’s intent, but when in doubt, ask for clarification and never assume. Remember, your SNCO is your bridge to the command. The SNCO not only

has experience in developing junior Marines but officers as well.

Recommendations for the Officer

First, allow your NCOs to take ownership of the platoon, develop, create, and drive the training and standards (Table 1), and of equal importance, allow them to make mistakes in training. Too often Marine Corps’ leaders adopt a zero-defect mentality; meaning that the command-and-control structure does not tolerate mistakes. This zero-defect mentality can come from numerous origins, but the result is the same, where the subordinate does not feel empowered and they become timid and indecisive.

We, as leaders in the Marine Corps, often preach that it is acceptable for our Marines to make mistakes in training, but when a Marine makes a mistake, we too often unnecessarily reprimand them. Thus, we must always self-assess to ensure that we are allowing mistakes of commission, meaning the NCO tried something that did not work out the way they intended, while not tolerating mistakes of omission, meaning they did not try anything. Or, simply stated, the NCO should get a speeding ticket, not a parking ticket. As stated by President

Theodore Roosevelt, “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”⁸

It is important to distinguish the title that the Marine Corps bestows on a young officer: platoon commander, not platoon leader. Meaning that a young officer commands their platoon, while the NCOs lead the platoon. While a commander must be a leader as a prerequisite (our leadership traits and principles), they must exercise the commander’s intent and provide the NCOs with task and purpose. With task and purpose, the officer must allow the NCOs to execute the mission how the NCO sees fit. By being a platoon leader, a young officer takes away the authority of their enlisted, which results in a centralized command with a slower tempo that is less resilient to friction. Remember that you

As a young officer, do not rest on your own personal accomplishments, or on how well you know your profession, but rather on how well you have developed your NCOs to know their profession and how much ownership they have in the platoon.

The Relationship Between the Staff Non-Commissioned Officer and the Officer

It is often said that good SNCOs make good officers. We both disagree with this statement. The Marine Corps invests a great deal in the screening, selecting, and training of their officer corps, starting from their commissioning source to the Basic Officer Course, and then minimally to their MOS school. Every single officer in our Corps goes through six months of instruction at The Basic School where they are taught leadership, basic infantry

efficient and effective outcome for the unit. Failure of this could result from numerous sources, and according to the book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni is often due to an absence of trust, a fear of conflict, a lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results.¹²

Recommendations for the SNCO

As the SNCO, especially the first SNCO of a new officer, you have a profound influence on the officer’s career, expectations, and outlook on SNCOs. Similar to the officer, if you want Marines to emulate you, you must be worthy of emulation. Additionally, like your officer counterpart, you must have a broad view of warfare and the various MOSs. At the end of the day, no one will come seeking your advice if you have no advice to give. Do not be saddened by the amount of time you will spend in the company office if you do nothing to exit it. The command post is not your appointed place of duty, and you are certainly not a secretary. Remember, you are the most experienced person in the platoon and therefore should have the most influence on each level. Never forget that you were a junior Marine fresh from basic training; you remember your first mission as a team or squad leader, and in some circumstances, you have commanded the position filled by the officer.

In the book, *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win*, Michael Useem tells the story of how Lt-Gen Pace (Ret), prior to becoming a four-star general, was highly efficient and effective while working for six different superiors. In Useem’s book, LtGen Pace had three guiding principles, specifically, “One: Ensure that his own performance was above reproach. Another: Fully inform each of the bosses of what he was recommending to all the others. And a third: When in doubt on how to resolve the commander’s conflicting requirements, act on principle.”¹³ The three guidelines can easily be applied by an SNCO with a direct line of communication to his officer to ensure the best solution for their unit.

While a commander must be a leader ... they must exercise the commander’s intent and provide the NCOs with task and purpose.

cannot lead everywhere; in Chapter 4 of *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, our Marine Corps emphasizes mission tactics and commander’s intent as pillars of how the Marine Corps conducts war.

Second, surround yourself with genius. The book *Surrounded by Genius* by Dr. Gregerman builds a concept of unleashing your organization’s full potential on two ideas: “The first idea is that we all have the potential to be geniuses,” and, “the second idea is that we live in a world where we are surrounded by genius and knowledge that can be used to transform practically any company or organization.”⁹ Surrounding yourself with genius, while also empowering your Marines, can be seen in Table 1. As stated by the *United States Army Leadership Handbook, FM 6-22*, “Leadership requires knowing about tactics, technical systems, organizations, management of resources, and tendencies and need of people.”¹⁰

tactics, and fire support. It is through this investment that there should never be anything less than a good Marine officer. A poor Marine officer does not reflect their SNCO leadership or a failure in the system but rather a failure of that officer. However, as stated by Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, “Good is the enemy of great.”¹¹

We feel good officers are the result of the system, but great officers are a reflection of the SNCO, and that our Corps needs great officers due to the amount of influence they have on their unit. Furthermore, the junior Marines deserve a great officer. A good SNCO is similar to a compass. A new officer in the operating forces knows the cardinal direction that they need to be heading toward, and if going the completely wrong way, it is a failure on the officer’s part. However, the SNCO can and should narrow down the direction of the commander to facilitate the most

Recommendations for the Officer

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey's fifth habit states "seek first to understand, then to be understood,"¹⁴ or simply stated: listen first, talk second. The SNCO will likely have more experience than the officer and will be more in touch with the Marines. This is a great asset, an asset that should be wholeheartedly embraced by the officer, and is exemplified by the T-Shape Philosophy.

As the officer, you may likely have more doctrinal knowledge than your SNCO, while they will have more experience, which is the ideal relationship. In Chapter 3 (Preparing for War) of *MCDP 1*, there is a section dedicated to doctrine.¹⁵ Having a solid understanding of our doctrine which is descriptive and not prescriptive is a role of an officer, which when combined with the experiences of the SNCO on how to optimally employ the Marines' capabilities, facilitates a highly combat-effective unit.

A junior officer, or any officer, should never feel intimidated by not having all of the answers and should seek the guidance of their SNCO. Your SNCO can help guide the unit in the correct direction. However, you must have the moral courage to command your unit and not be a figurehead. Since you are a human, there will be times when you are wrong, but since you are a Marine officer, you can never be morally weak. Lastly, remember that you are above the Marines only in rank structure and nothing else. You must be the first to rise and the last to sleep, you must fill your own sandbags and dig your own fighting hole, and you must also share in the suffering. Simply put, when your Marines are wet, cold, and hungry, you are wet, cold, and hungry.

Conclusion

Why does the Marine Corps need officers? The Marine Corps needs officers because while we absolutely need the enlisted SMEs, we need Marines who can employ and harmonize the SMEs; officers who can and should employ the SME's genius, experience, and the potential of the Marines. While the SNCOs can accomplish this, we need

someone to progress rapidly in multiple domains. In an infantry battalion, the mastery gunnery sergeant and battalion gunner should know more about infantry techniques, procedures, and equipment than the battalion commander; however, the battalion commander should know more about the warfighting functions. At the end of the day, the Marine officer is training to become a MAGTF officer, as demonstrated by the curriculum at The Basic School, Expeditionary Warfighting

... you must have the moral courage to command your unit and not be a figurehead.

School, and so on, while the enlisted are on a continual pursuit to master their craft. Through the optimal relationship of the T-Shape Philosophy, as executed as a culture and not a mere philosophy, we as a Corps are more able to impose our will on the enemy by our increased tempo, initiative, and decentralization, which increases our combat power. In this era of strategic competition/Great Power Competition, this culture will be needed more than ever before in our history.

Notes

1. John A. Lejeune, *Marine Corps Order 29, "Relationship Between Officers and Enlisted,"* (Washington, DC: August 1920).
2. Department of the Navy, *Sustaining the Transformation*, (Washington, DC: 1999).
3. Jocko Willink, *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).
4. Daniel H Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009).
5. *Marine Corps Order 29.*

6. James Kerr, *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About The Business of Life* (London: Constable, 2015).

7. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008).

8. Theodore Roosevelt, "Theodore Roosevelt Quotes," *Dickson State University*, n.d., <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Learn-About-TR/TR-Quotes/In%20any%20moment%20of%20decision%20%20the%20best%20thing%20you%20can%20do%20is%20the%20right%20thing%20%20the%20next#:~:text=Theodore%20Roosevelt%20Quotes,you%20can%20do%20is%20nothing>.

9. Alan S. Gregeman, *Surrounded by Genius: Unlocking the Brilliance in Yourself, Your Colleagues, and Your Organization* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007).

10. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 6-22*, (Washington, DC: 2012).

11. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

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13. Michael Useem, *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss so You Both Win* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

14. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

15. Department of the Navy, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

>Authors' Note: Capt Carter and 1stSgt Ochoa served together as company commander and company first sergeant at the Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry-East, where they developed the concepts written in this article through their mutual trust, respect, and experience.

