

Leadership Thoughts from a New Brigadier General

Still learning!

by BGen Kevin J. Stewart

In April 2018, I surprisingly received a phone call from the Commandant (CMC) and was informed that I had been selected to serve as a brigadier general. The CMC went on to offer both his congratulations and condolences. In many respects, I am still in shock and remember little else that was said during that phone call and simply know that my selection for brigadier general was based far more on the actions of those that I have served with than anything I ever personally did. After nearly two years from that initial phone call and service as the CG,

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2d MLG, I reflect back on the leadership lessons I have learned in this new role and perhaps some may find of value.

Most importantly, I have re-learned and been reminded of how much I do not know. Einstein said it best, “the

more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know,” and I think that same sentiment aptly applies to becoming a brigadier general or any new rank for that matter. Fortunately, as the CG of the 2d MLG, I am blessed with a tremendous team of professionals who carry the torch every single day to ensure we accomplish the mission, and this has been true in every billet since I was a second lieutenant. Trust and believe in your team; solicit their ideas and input. Be ambitious for the team. Something to consider: their way could be better than your way. With a little vision and intent, together you will accomplish much.

As a leader, it is easy to issue orders and all will follow. A more thoughtful leader will have a plan, create stability, and allow subordinates to take the initiative. A leader’s responsibility is to go slow in the right direction rather than to go fast in the wrong direction. Further, providing the team a “framework” rather than a “rulebook” will let them experiment without fear of failure and with the mindset that the only way to find out if something will work, is to do it. While good leadership is the answer to most of the challenges we face, it must be combined with even better “internal controls” to ensure a great organization.

I am a little reluctant to share this, but it is important to remind all on the importance of physical and mental toughness. In my first four months as the CG, 2d MLG, I was diagnosed with constrictive pericarditis and in-



The “servant leader” always puts the needs and effectiveness of the team first. (Photo courtesy of Camp Lejeune Public Affairs.)

formed by medical that I needed “open heart surgery” (a pericardiectomy). For someone who tries to work out every single day and always competes for high first-class fitness scores, this was hard to comprehend. I spent a week in the hospital for the surgery, a week at home to recover, and then back to work. As Marcus Aurelius said, “the obstacle in the way becomes the way,” and this served as my guide as I worked to get back in form. In less than 90 days of surgery, I passed my Combat Fitness Test (265) and was back to full duty with no limitations. Interestingly, after over a year, I still get questions on my health. As much as that bothers me at times, I know it is part of our culture; physical and mental toughness are hallmarks of being a Marine. It is okay to get injured, but it is not okay to “lick your wounds” or feel sorry for yourself. Recovery and fitness is hard, but your example in this area will pay dividends. In my view, it is even more important for a leader to be fit and able to lead from the front.

There is no handbook on how a general is supposed to act or lead, but there are lots of ideas and beliefs on this from many observers. Regardless of all this, the best thing for any leader is to just be yourself and never forget that what you are as a person is far more important than what you are as a Marine. It is easy to be consumed by service as a Marine, and our families can sometimes take second place. Never allow this and encourage all those that you serve with to give their best to their families just as they do to the Marine Corps. I also offer that a calm and optimistic temperament is a force multiplier, and your personal example is the greatest leadership tool available. John Wooden said it best, “if you are true to yourself, you are going to be true to everyone else.”

The fighting spirit and history of battles won has made us all part of the world’s most feared and trusted force. Although this is undeniable, it is also important to acknowledge that we can be better. While the new *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* is putting the Marine Corps on a new trajectory to be ready for a future fight, every Marine can be a little better today. We can all

work harder to increase our fitness, enhance our discipline, and be better leaders. Creating a culture and climate that fosters this type of commitment is the goal of every leader. Marines joined to be challenged, and we need to be even more demanding so every Marine becomes the best that they are capable of becoming. The leader’s goal is to be less of a hero and more of a hero maker.

It is often said that if you discipline yourself, then others will not have to. While that is undeniable, there are circumstances that require a leader to hold a Marine accountable for his or her actions. In this regard, it is important to

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discipline to teach rather than punish. While it may sound like a subtle difference, it is much more profound and can have far reaching impacts if the power of discipline is abused. A good leader is someone who can discipline a Marine but do it in a manner that does not cause any resentment. Abraham Lincoln said, “any man can withstand adversity, but to truly test someone’s character place them in a position of power.” This test is of the utmost importance and should serve as the guiding light of how we yield the power we are entrusted with as leaders.

Gratitude and appreciation are far more impactful than most other leadership tools. If the Marines know you care and you keep their best interests at the forefront, they will exceed all expectations. This is the essence of servant leadership, and good leaders live to serve. Simon Sinek said it well, “If you want to feel happy, do something for yourself. If you want to feel fulfilled, do something for someone else.” Never forget, the smallest gestures can make the biggest difference: a note, a coin,

a pat on the back, or an award are so impactful.

Have fun and enjoy being a Marine. No matter your rank or billet, there are few things in life more meaningful or impactful than being a Marine. While warfighting is serious, we can train and prepare with a smile on our face. For the more senior leader’s consideration, if we are not having fun, why would anyone want to stay in and take our place someday? Paramount to this is to just focus on doing your best and do not worry about any future promotion. Always remember, the best competition is against yourself.

To conclude, while there are many important aspects to being a Marine, delivering effective leadership at all levels is the most important. The 13th CMC of the Marine Corps, LtGen John A. Lejeune, stated,

Leadership is the sum of those qualities of intellect, human understanding, and moral character that enables a person to inspire and control a group of people successfully.

To be a good leader, you must be disciplined and holding a high standard of discipline is one of the many requirements necessary to be ready for battle. Our motto, “Semper Paratus,” means “Always Faithful.” Always. Not most of the time or Monday through Friday. Always. Within every Marine lies the courage to fight and the will to win, and the “pain of discipline is nothing like the pain of regret.” Lead well!

