

Leadership Lessons from Privates First Class

I'm in charge, Sergeant Major

by Col Mike Jernigan

“Leadership has no level. Leadership has no title. Every individual has traits of a leader. The most unexpected person can be a great leader.”¹

—Bob Nardelli, Former Chief Executive Officer, Home Depot, 2004

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to step outside the formation and give your cadence from the side and the back of the formation.” The private first-class acknowledged, “Aye, aye, Sergeant Major,” implemented the corrections, took his leave, and resumed marching the formation toward their destination.

I was struck by several factors by this encounter. My initial reaction was that it was good for my morale to see a private first-class take responsibility and respond appropriately to a sergeant major. Correspondingly, I was encouraged that the sergeant major did not “flame” the private first-class and demonstrated that “professional competence is not enough to be a good leader; good leaders must truly care about those they lead.”² Why did observing this briefest of conversations between two Marines with twenty years of life and Marine Corps experience separating them resonate with me? I reflected on the situation and realized that this private first-class exhibited several positive leadership attributes, and I could learn from him.

A Leader Has Courage

I am pretty sure I was not the only one in this situation when the sergeant major yelled out “Stop!” who thought to himself, “Oh, [insert expletive of choice], I’m about to get chewed out

for something I don’t even know what I or what one of these knuckleheads did.” The private first-class displayed his courage when asked, “Who’s in charge?” by immediately responding, “I’m in charge.”

Leadership and courage have obvious applicability to combat. This relationship is, quite frankly, why the Marine Corps trains Marines the way it does. Courage helps deal with acute stress; leadership inspires that courage. Acute stress is a reaction to a stressor that causes the body to dump all of its adrenaline and triggers every “fight or flight” survival instinct. It is what somebody experiences during and immediately after an automobile accident—or when somebody is shooting at you. A common reaction to acute stress is fear. Fear is mankind’s reaction to danger. The private first-class I observed may have thought of his surprise engagement with a sergeant major as “danger” and its associated fear. Marine Corps foundational training is on overcoming fear. Controlling fear increases one’s ability to react to physical threats and survive.³

Beirut Marine Capt Robert Mastriion explains that there are three types of fear in combat: fear of helplessness, fear of physical weakness, and fear of the realization of death.⁴ The fear of helplessness can be seen in sports. Occasionally, opposing teams appear to be evenly matched, yet one team does not play well on game day; the further they get behind—the worse they do. Armchair analysts call this getting “psyched out”:

We typically do not think about the youngest in our profession having something to teach us. Recently, I happened to see an interesting exchange. A small group of Marines was marching between locations. They had a strong cadence and were in step. A sergeant major saw them and growled, “Stop!” A confident, “Detail, Halt,” came from the middle of the formation. The sergeant major asked, “Who’s in charge?” A private first class stepped out of the formation, stood in front of the sergeant major, looked him in the eyes, and said clearly, “I’m in charge, Sergeant Major.”

The sergeant major then graciously and gently both encouraged and corrected the Marine: “Your cadence sounded loud and crisp. But you need

the losing team, before or during the game, considered the situation hopeless and is beaten before the game begun.⁵ Mixed-martial arts fighter Conor McGregor is famous for this technique and is known as “a master of the mental game, defeating some opponents before the first punch is thrown.”⁶ Typically,

Marine units don’t fall prey to this type of fear ... because our entry-level training given to enlisted Marines and officers instills in them a sense of supremacy and self-confidence that insulates them ... Thus, it is critical that the self-confidence our young Marines have when they initially join the unit be reinforced, not eroded.⁷

The second type of fear, that of not being strong enough to complete the necessary task, is brought on by fatigue. The more tired one is, the more one is susceptible to the fear of weakness.⁸ The Marine Corps addresses this fear directly and is notorious among military Services for its physical fitness demands of every individual. Marines can be described as low-paid professional athletes for the amount of conditioning work they do and length of “season” they have. The Marine Corps’ high standards of strength and endurance directly mitigate this source of fear.

The fear of realization of death produces anxiety and causes people to feel “powerless to overcome what may occur.”⁹ It is important to note that this fear stems from an absolute certainty that death is imminent, not a likelihood or possibility. Winston Churchill’s doctor and World War II veteran, Lord Moran, wrote *The Anatomy of Courage*. In it, he explains why some men fight on against seemingly insurmountable odds while others cower in shell holes and flinch at the slightest noise. Variables that enhance courage include camaraderie, a sense of duty, a sense of personal honor, and resilience—among others. The Marine Corps capitalizes on all of these factors and inoculates against the fear of death in its entry-level training and then sustains that resistance as part of its enduring culture. Most surviving Medal of Honor recipients, when asked why they conducted their valorous acts, explain to the effect: “Since I was going to die anyway, I might as well do some-

thing.” The Marine Corps venerates its heroes and teaches all of its members that it is better to die well than to live as frightened men who failed their duty.

Back to the private first class addressing the sergeant major; he may not have been in physical danger, but it is likely that he thought he was about to be (figuratively) shredded into little pieces. This private first-class displayed what Roman playwright Plautus explained two thousand years earlier: “Courage in danger is half the battle.”¹⁰ Where do eighteen-year old novices learn the courage to stand face-to-face with intimidating men? Massachusetts State Senator and Marine SSgt Robert Hall believes that Marine Corps Recruit Training teaches this concept. He wrote, and attributes his life successes to, an essay called “Everything I Need to Know, I Learned in Boot Camp.” Hall explains, “Courage isn’t the absence of fear—courage is being afraid and still doing what needs to be done.”¹¹ The private first-class used the courage he was taught at Recruit Training to step up to the sergeant major and accept responsibility.

A Leader Is Responsible

That acceptance of responsibility is critically important to the credibility of a leader. The private first-class-in-charge remembered that old adage taught at boot camp: whenever two Marines are together, one of them is in charge. He recognized and accepted his responsibility as the one calling cadence—even if that meant having a conversation with a sergeant major. Leaders are marked by their willingness to take responsibility.¹²

A Leader Is Prepared

Before the surprise encounter with the sergeant major, the formation of privates and private first-classes sorted themselves. One was determined to be senior. He organized them into ranks and called cadence. They marched as they had been taught at Recruit Training. The private first-class in-charge did not know that a surprise pop quiz was coming. He only knew that he was senior and accordingly must do what he had been taught. He kept the formation in step as they moved toward their next commitment. Similarly, any well-qualified leader prepares for what is approaching, whether known or un-



The most junior Marines often prove through their actions that rank does not make you a leader—being a leader makes you a leader. (Photo by Cpl Timothy Lenzo.)

known. Every leader must gird for the coming unknown test of his leadership: non-commissioned officers complete non-resident professional development courses, lieutenants have conversations with previous wars' veterans, and commanding generals read works of ancient warriors and historic figures. Leaders study, practice, and prepare for both expected and unanticipated situations.

As I reflected on this exchange with the private first-class, I remembered an encounter with a different private first-class years earlier at Camp Lejeune. He was new to the unit, and the "salty" non-commissioned officers were having some fun at his expense and sent him on a quest to find a specific administrative form. After a period of no success, he asked the first sergeant.

"First sergeant, where can I find an Eye Dee Ten Tee form?"

The first sergeant recognized the joke for what it was, "Marine, they are sending you to look for form that doesn't exist—an ID10T form. They are calling you an idiot. Who gave you this task?"

The private first-class was loyal and reluctant to identify his non-commissioned officers. The first sergeant let him off the hook (knowing that there were only two NCOs in that platoon at the time) and said, "Private first-class, I believe it was Cpl _____ and Cpl _____ who gave you this task. That's not how we do things in this unit, and they have something coming to them for treating you this way. What do you recommend I do to them?"

The private first-class looked at the deck and twisted his cover nervously, "Whatever you want to do, first sergeant."

The first sergeant bellowed as only first sergeants can, "It's not what I want to do private first-class; it's what you think needs done!" He then proceeded to question if specific parts of the private first-class' anatomy were made either of brass or cotton. The private first-class allowed that his were metallic, squared his shoulders, looked the first sergeant in the eye, and in a strong voice demanded, "I want them to get down on their knees and beg for forgiveness in front of a company formation!" The ludicrousness of the statement caught everyone

in earshot by surprise and they howled in laughter. As innovative justice was awarded that day, I reflected on what this private first-class showed me.

Leaders Are Bold

The private first-class took the challenge offered him by the first sergeant and responded with boldness. His brashness accelerated his acceptance into the company. Boldness is rewarded on battlefields and boardrooms. Both require leaders "willing to think and act in an independent fashion—men who as they consider each situation, will act in a bold and decisive fashion."¹³ Leaders are expected to seize the moment with resolute action.

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Leaders Use Humor Appropriately

Humor can effectively defuse stressful situations, as the private first-class demonstrated. Leaders can use humor to build resilience, address adversity, and develop camaraderie. However, the humor must never be biting or at the expense of others. *We are laughing at our situation together* builds teams, but *we are laughing at you* creates divisions. Leaders are responsible for both outcomes. A person who can maintain his "lightness of mind" will not easily be unraveled in combat, and teams that laugh at themselves are stronger for it.¹⁴

Leaders Come in All Sizes

As I reflect on these two exchanges with privates first-class, I recognize that leadership is rank independent. John Wooden was a basketball coach with the University of California Los Angeles. He won ten national championships, including still-unmatched seven consecutively. People who played for him went on to be professional athletes, published authors, successful business owners, and U.S. Senators. He was known as a leader

and a mentor who had an ability to express ideas simply. Regarding leadership, he said, "A leader can be led."¹⁵ As I reflect on what I learned from these two private first-classes, I realize rank does not make you a leader—being a leader makes you a leader.

Notes

1. Personal conversation between author and Bob Nardelli on 21 August 2004.
2. Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2014).
3. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Warfighting Skills Program, Marine Corps Leadership*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Institute, 1990).
4. Robert Mastrion, "Understanding Fear," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: September 1986).
5. Ibid.
6. Jeff Wagenheim, "Just Like That, Conor McGregor is Back in Control," *ESPN*, (January 2020), available at <https://www.espn.com>.
7. "Understanding Fear."
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Quoted in Aubrey Newman, *Follow Me II: More on the Human Element in Leadership*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992).
11. Robert A. Hall, "Everything I Need to Know, I Learned in Boot Camp," *Marine Corps Times*, (Arlington, VA: Army Times Publishing Company, March 2000).
12. J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1967).
13. Ludwig Beck et al., *Die Truppenführung [Troop Leading]*, (Berlin: German Field Service Regulations, 1933).
14. Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1998).
15. John Wooden and Steve Jamison, *Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections on and off the Court*, (Lincolnwood, IL: Contemporary Books, 1997).

