Impact on Leadership

Addressing how social media changes the way Marines react to being led

by BGen David Reist & SgtMaj Ken Conover

Discussion has always occurred about the "old Corps vs the new Corps." Marines of old and today have proven their mettle in combat; this missive does not question valor. Rather, is there a need to alter the manner in which Marines are led today and do those of the current generation not appreciate the impact of social media? The premise offered is that social media is altering the way Marines learn, think, and how they react to leadership—and that younger generation of leaders are influenced by the way they lead because of social media.

First, when we (the older Marines) joined the Marine Corps, we left our home, our family, and our friends and joined the Corps. The Corps did not join us—we joined the Corps! We were indoctrinated with the Corps' ethos, its customs, and its methods of doing

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things. We rarely called home or visited, so we became totally immersed in the Marine Corps, good or bad. But today, a Marine can (and does) communicate daily with family and friends leveraging iPhones, Facebook, and Instagram. They do not have that reinforcement of Marine Corps ideals surrounding them 24/7. Hypothetically, if something happens in the Marine's workplace during the day, the issue can be discussed and vetted with non-Marines that same day—giving that Marine a non-Marine "take" on the situation. This is not nec-

essarily bad, but the opportunity to balance what Marine leadership is directing can (and is) discussed/judged by non-Marines. With the number of parents/friends who likely have not served in the Marine Corps, this likely leads to *why did it get handled that way* advice from the friend back on the block or a parent (an arm-chair quarterback so to speak).

Second, the event above can and is often shared across social media. Imagine that Lt Smith takes action during the day on a matter and then that evening Lt Smith's actions are shared on a social media platform by the impacted Marine. If positive, it is a good thing. If negative though, it will gain legs and be re-tweeted—and bad news travels exponentially faster than good news, sometimes all the way to political leadership. It is fair to assume that any negative story will not offer an honest perspective telling all sides of the story but rather portray a snapshot that makes the situation look bad in favor of a disgruntled Marine. You can imagine the scenario as this unfolds: Someone's spouse up the chain of command sees the post on social media and Lt Smith is asked by his chain of command "What happened?" This likely will not get asked nicely and by now the story is out and correcting is difficult, if not impossible. In the meantime, SSgt Jones, the platoon sergeant, goes looking for the Marine who posted the story and nothing good is likely going to happen

In the past, part of becoming a Marine meant giving up daily contact or communications with family and friends. Today, social media has reduced this isolation. (Photo by Sgt Christian Oliver Cachola.)

in that encounter. Lt Smith grew up with social media as did the Marine who posted the story. The staff sergeant may not have and for sure the battalion commander and sergeant major did not (may be savvy today though). How does Lt Smith react to making decisions in the future knowing social media can destroy his day? How does a battalion commander or sergeant major now look at social media and how do they lead knowing anything they do is subject to immediate proliferation? In the past, the "bitching" was between Marines, not shared outside. Also, if a mundane issue, will the commanding officer back the lieutenant or yield to pressure? This goes towards trust and as former Secretary of State George Schultz stated, "Trust is the coin of the realm. When trust is in the room, good things happen. When trust is not in the room, good things do not happen."

Third, leadership at times today is misconstrued as micro-management. Many things have changed: open squad bays to individual rooms; contracted mess halls vs mess duty; contracted lawn care vs responsibility for individual areas; contracted security forces vs area guards; and uniforms that do not require as much attention to detail. These have been put in place for a better "life-style" for Marines but some question if these conveniences are taking away from camaraderie, discipline, and attention to detail. Some do not understand that the attention to detail paid in the police of their area is directly related to effectiveness in combat. When you see a Marine that has not shaved on the weekend or an area that has trash along a fence-line, this is a degradation of discipline. This erosion cannot be instantly regained when deployment for combat is required. Organizational and individual discipline is the hallmark of the Marine Corps.

Fourth, is the desire to command and influence in today's environment. Command has always been something a Marine officer aspired to attain. They wanted to influence the emerging Marines and put their thumbprint on those Marines. Simply stated, some look at simply "surviving a command tour" or in other cases declining Command as

the risk is not worth the reward. Do the senior leaders today appreciate the demands placed on younger leaders with all the emerging regulations and social changes (e.g., transgender policies, sexual harassment reporting requirements, etc)?

Fifth, and related, is how Marines learn today. Older Marines went to class and went to the library. Computers facilitated data storage/retrieval—something you typed your papers on and printed off. The younger generation are using computers to learn. There is a fundamental disconnect between teaching and learning (in society too), and leaders must appreciate this as they lead their Marines today.

Company-level leadership is the key to success in the continued transformation of Marines. The company level is the center of gravity for most—if not all—issues that will surface in a young Marines experience with the Corps. How are we developing company leaders today and how do we recognize leaders who excel at the basics? How are we ensuring the basic standards are being maintained and is it clear today what that standard is? If things are in a state of disrepair, is the standard and message clear?

Good officers and SNCOs who understand the basics naturally affiliate good order and discipline to combat proficiency. Undisciplined units will get the hell kicked out of them in a fight. This focus takes time to square away and should there be a concern that young leaders have too much on their plate to both understand the basics and instill them daily? This translates into talking about what "right looks like" and why. The SNCO in the FMF is merely an extension of the drill instructor and the company-grade officer is that "commandership" that junior Marines observe daily. What they learned in boot camp/Officer Candidate School is then simply an extension to their tours in the FMF. It cannot be stressed enough the link between disciplines serving as the central component of effective warfighting.

This should/will then translate into how a young Marine thinks before articulating a message across social media.

How do we train leaders to lead today in the emerging world of social media and whatever comes next? We must first appreciate that leadership is complicated with endless variables that has always been a balance between the young and old. Although much can be taught via a distance learning program/computer lesson, leadership requires discussion and a Socratic approach. Leadership is like professional development or PT— you have to continue to work at it daily. Officers need to continually understand what and how their troops think and then motivate them to be good Marines and team players. The number of "likes" on a post is not important in a cohesive team; winning in combat is paramount. Society does not emphasize these points. Mentorship and talking with subordinates (not "to" but "with") remain paramount. All need to learn from these exchanges. Articulating intent (the essence of maneuver warfare) and trust will always win the day. Trust is paramount.

Leadership has always been hard to describe, teach, and do. When we see a good leader, it is often hard to exactly define why that style is so effective. On the contrary, bad leadership rapidly rises to a visible level. In today's society within the social media environment, leadership techniques may require a different approach and perspective, not appreciated by those of yesterday. Let us appreciate what younger leaders have to deal with that is different from our tenure and help each other maintain the legacy of our Corps.

Let us offer a starting solution: Look at building trust and paying attention to the small things. Trust, as stated, is the most important quality. This goes back to Gen Lejeune and fostering that parent-child relationship. A child who trusts his parent would never knowingly release a harmful social media post. Simultaneously, we must get back to the basics and emphasize what is key to success in combat: discipline. Both of these take time but will pay endless dividends.

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