

A Practitioners Approach to 21st Century Leadership

Six best-practices

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Established hallmarks of leadership remain intangible but integral parts of formal military education. This is appropriate, especially in the military profession where combat leaders must inspire and elicit bold and selfless actions from others. Yet, a new practical leadership approach that embraces six learnable, manageable practices is necessary to meet the demanding security challenges of the 21st century: reading a wide range of books and other publications; writing clearly, cogently, and often; listening to seniors and juniors alike; speaking with clarity and authority; understanding operational cyber capabilities and vulnerabilities; and aggressively seek-

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ing out new challenges with enthusiasm.¹ Intentionally ignoring the binary “skills”-versus-“traits” distinctions, these six practices facilitate military members’ ability to think critically and strategically, and they enable the fluency to convey ideas coherently, powerfully, and

persuasively.² They make good leaders better.

Although value-laden intangible “natural” or “inherent” leadership characteristics—such as initiative, judgment, and courage have enduring utility—the learnable and tangible practices discussed in this article offer an attainable objective framework comprising a few unambiguous, reasonably measurable, and concrete skills. They inculcate depth and confidence to those who lead and serve as a road map to develop substantive and sustaining practices that inspire subordinates. These accessible practices differ from—yet also foster—the “inherent ability [that] cannot be instilled,” as Gen Cates put it in the prior distillation. They are among the “latent or dormant [leadership ingredients that] can be developed.”

A previous Chair for the Study of Leadership at the United States Military Academy at West Point delighted in telling everyone in a military uniform that

“Leadership is intangible, hard to measure, and difficult to describe. Its quality would seem to stem from many factors. But certainly they must include a measure of inherent ability to control and direct ... Inherent ability cannot be instilled, but that which is latent or dormant can be developed. Other ingredients can be acquired. They are not easily learned. But leaders can be and are made.”

***—Gen Clifton B. Cates,
19th Commandant of the Marine Corps***

[Y]ou're a leader at every level of your service, no matter what your formal rank The best military leaders use power with great discretion and mostly lead by example, by request, by showing the way. Leadership is not about invoking rank; leadership is about seeing clearly what must be done, taking action, and inspiring others to join you in throwing their energies full force into the task.³

The authors of *Leadership Reckoning* criticize what they see as the “false assertion that leader ability is ‘intangible’ or perhaps an inborn quality that cannot be changed.”⁴ There is a core of wisdom in this admonition. People who exemplify leadership qualities may demonstrate what appear to be intangible factors from birth, but developing leadership depends more on what Cates called “acquired ingredients” than any inherited gifts. This article focuses on those ingredients—practices or proclivities that are too often undervalued or, worse, overlooked in leadership development—and we review each more closely below.

Except for practice #5 (understanding operational cyber capabilities and vulnerabilities), many of history’s best known military leaders have engaged in these practices through the centuries and used them as platforms for their own leadership growth as well as to enhance the strengths of junior leaders in similar roles at lower echelons. Being enthusiastic about the six practices enables leaders to reach their potential as critical thinkers and adaptive leaders.

Just to be clear, we intentionally avoid reiterating the virtues of the fourteen well-settled vital and indispensable—yet mostly intangible—leadership traits enumerated in Marine Corps doctrine (*Marine Corps Pub. RP 0103*, “Principles of Marine Corps Leadership”): judgment, justice, dependability, integrity, decisiveness, tact, initiative, endurance, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and enthusiasm (which most Marines learn and commit to memory through the acronym JJDID-TIEBUCKLE). *Marine Corps Pub. RP 0103* also describes the Marine Corps’ 11 leadership principles (such as “know yourself and seek improvement” etc.) instilled in every Marine.

Rather, we embrace Gen John A LeJeune’s time-honored leadership axiom that is the cornerstone of the *Marine Corps Manual*:

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.⁵

Our six practices undergird the LeJeune brand of military leadership development for the 21st century. They help to solidify the characteristics of an effective leader, in combat or peacetime, one whose critical thinking and timely judgment must always be “at the ready.” As Gen James Mattis cogently observed, “I spent 30 years getting ready for that decision that took 30 seconds.”

Leadership literature frequently eschews specific guidance in favor of generalities about how aspiring leaders may foster their leadership potential to successfully ascend the ladder of rank and responsibility. Often this advice is vague and unhelpful. Thus, we focus on leadership practices that are *indispensable, objective, and practicable*.⁶ We expand on Gen Cates’ definable “ingredients” for critical and timely thinking by current and future generations of America’s military leaders.

Paradoxically, Marines who are familiar with all or some of our six practices may overlook them or take them for granted. This is unfortunate because all six are easy to understand, implement, assess, and nurture. Key though is the need for leaders not only to massage each practice, appropriate to rank or billet, but also to hone them throughout their careers. At a time when military commands may be geographically remote from overseas operating areas or conflict zones, leadership qualities are critical both far from the action and often within it as well.

All U.S. Service academies and war colleges include leadership programs in their core curricula: a military organization’s successful performance, especially in combat, depends mightily on skilled, informed, and confident leadership at every level. Danger places special demands on leadership qualifications.⁷

One example from the Pacific War shows the need for “layered leadership”

in combat zones and readiness to step into roles of stressful leadership—the presence of many leaders at different levels within large units engaged in combat. Col Joseph Alexander in *Utmost Savagery: The Three Days of Tarawa* makes a powerful case that “[t]he battle ... would have been lost without” the leadership of “[s]ix field grade officers, from as many commands, [who] would contribute significantly to ultimate victory at Betio.”⁸

Alexander also describes instances of private first-classes and lieutenants who jumped in to fill leadership gaps in critical moments of Tarawa’s three intense days of combat, often including brutal hand-to-hand fighting. Such historical examples are highly instructive because they capture acts of decisive combat leadership at every rank to include the phenomenon of having to be ready to “fleet up” when senior leaders become casualties.

These historical leadership accounts of Marines in action help balance academic and theoretical leadership works with the need for practical application. CWO4 Timothy S. McWilliams has insightfully observed that “the study of leadership has evolved significantly into a multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary field, receiving contributions from a variety of disciplines, including management science, psychology, and behavioral sciences.”⁹ Thus, the Services must adroitly synthesize numerous approaches to educating, instilling, observing, and measuring time-tested leadership traits/principles with the six practices discussed here. Our six neither replace nor contradict the Corps’ fourteen traits or eleven principles. Only one, however, *knowledge*, comes close to capturing aspects of these six practices. Neither does Sun Tzu’s list of five in *The Art of War*—intelligence, credibility, humaneness, courage, discipline—address our six.

Critically, these practices have been successfully internalized by past leaders like Winston S. Churchill, Chester Nimitz, Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, Joseph Dunford, and James Mattis. We highlight their leadership roles to illustrate the attainable platforms on which they stood and their

demonstrated exceptional leadership fostered and supported by the six practices. So, it will come as no surprise that we recommend these practices be incorporated into formal leadership training and every Marine's self-development program.

Practice #1

Read a wide range of books and other publications: *Regular reading stimulates cognition and thinking generally, as numerous studies prove. The reading habit should be ingrained, varied, and continuous. It includes not only professional or strategic reading, but also the spectrum of fiction, non-fiction, and general interest.*

Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flat-footed in any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed before. It doesn't give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead.

***—Gen James Mattis,
20 November 2003***

Mattis is famous for his prolific reading habit, and for his personal library of approximately 7,000 volumes. Obviously, the general delves into a wide range of subjects, not only the Commandant's (or any other) Professional Reading List.

Few, if any, can match the intensity and breadth of a voracious reader like Gen Mattis, but all notable leaders embrace intellectual curiosity that, in turn, requires reading well beyond what may be required in formal schools, war college curricula, and the Commandant's Professional Reading List. As Mattis teaches, reading "lights what is often a dark path ahead." He illustrates that

reading serves as training and preparation for the kind of critical and strategic thinking that leaders need.¹⁰

Reading *quality* books of all varieties opens one's mind, stimulates the imagination, and provokes original, creative thinking. Marines should charge through the Commandant's Professional Reading List but should not—and cannot—stop there. They must read widely in all forms including fiction, philosophy, and poetry. Above all else, aspiring leaders should consider the specific titles of memorable books that other military readers recommend.¹¹

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We urge adopting reading habits for a lifetime, including the following:

- Recommended professional reading should remain a priority, but other reading is also essential for personal and professional growth.
- Try to read something good every day, even if you have only a few minutes.
- If a book is less than intriguing or interesting, set it aside, do not get hung up on finishing everything you start.
- Some books, especially non-fiction, invite reading chapters or sections, not the entire book.
- Be comfortable with reading two, three, or more books at the same time.
- On vacation, entertain yourself with well-spun fiction. If you prefer historical military fiction, it is available in abundance. But do not resist other kinds of stories as well, including science fiction.
- Manage reading beyond what is professionally required so that it's not a burden—read what you can, when you can, and enjoy it.

Practice #2

Writing clearly, cogently, and often. *Writing is an indispensable method of communication because it offers an avenue for reflection regardless of how long or what you are writing. Writing to publish offers you an opportunity to mature your thinking on a topic.*

To do our work, we will have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent in looking for the essential points. I ask my colleagues and their staffs to see to it that their Reports are shorter.

***—Prime Minister
Winston Churchill in
a Memorandum to His
Cabinet, 9 August 1940***

In 1953, Churchill won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his *History of World War II*. His writing prowess and prodigious literary output are legendary, and we are not suggesting that others should aspire to that level of accomplishment. At the same time, he wrote about the importance of writing, and his lessons are invaluable for all professionals. For example, as Prime Minister in 1940, he famously limited subordinates to a single page for written briefings and emphasized the values of both brevity and clarity.

Written words are among the most indispensable tools of military leaders. Writing in all forms enables the writer to reach both large and small audiences, and they allow a reader to revisit what is said without any limitation. Here are

some of the most important facets on writing for leaders:

- Military leaders write professionally every day, often many times a day. They should always aim to be clear, concise, and persuasive. This admonition applies to written orders.
- Writing takes practice and work. Lots of it. It goes without saying that some writings are more important than others, and the level of importance will drive the amount and intensity of preparation and drafting. In anything of importance, multiple drafts almost always create the best product.
- Write for your chosen audience.
- When time permits, make sure your writing is accurate through research and by collaborating with others who can proofread.

Take opportunities to write for publication. Whether it is a letter to the editor, an “all hands” bulletin, or an article in a publication such as the *Marine Corps Gazette*, there is nothing quite like working on and revising a document that many people may read. Publishing is an opportunity to hone this important military skill.

Practice #3

Listen to seniors and juniors alike: *Listening means hearing and valuing others' ideas and input, regardless of rank or position. It is often the most overlooked of the six traits.*

Listen to your non-commissioned officers, your chief petty officers. They don't expect you to do everything they tell you ... but they do expect to be heard.

—Secretary of Defense James Mattis

Effective leaders are effective listeners. Commanders at every level know, or should know, that ingenious thoughts

and ideas reside within the ranks. While there may be occasions when a commander does not have the luxury or the time to seek out the thinking of subordinates, the willingness to invite the comments and insights of others—especially when they hold differing views—must become habit.

- Encourage both peers and subordinates to come to you with their concerns and ideas.
- Be open to those concerns and ideas.
- Listen to your leaders and adopt their best habits.
- Make special time available to “open the floor” to comments and suggestions from subordinates.
- Remember that subordinates—especially subordinates—appreciate your willingness to hear them. Humility is not a weakness; it is a strength.
- Reward those who provide ideas. Letting subordinates know that they are appreciated rewards their openness and courage to speak their minds.

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Practice #4

Speak with clarity and authority: *Effective oral communication offers an opportunity to instruct, educate, and share expertise and passion.*

Churchill, Eisenhower, Dunford, and Mattis did not become effective military speakers by luck or accident. They honed their oratory prowess; they worked at it and developed the ability to capture and even inspire audiences, large and small.

- Think about what you are going to say before you say it.
- Depending upon the time available, jot down notes to help organize what you intend to say.
- When time is available, practice what you are planning to say.

One of the first qualities that I'd look at is the ability to look at complex problems, identify the core elements of those complex problems, and the implications of those core elements—and then to be able to communicate to people about the nature of that particular problem and how to frame it so you can solve it. That's my definition of critical thinking.

—Gen Joseph Dunford, CJCS, 8 December 2017, Carlisle Barracks

- Speak with clarity and, generally, in complete sentences.
- Speak *to* and not *down* at your audience.

Practice #5

Understand operational cyber capabilities and vulnerabilities.

The Navy and Marine Corps must develop leaders who understand the complex nature of cyberspace, and they must develop a force that can maneuver with the requisite speed and tempo. Cy-

ber operations must be equal in planning for a combined arms approach.

**—CDR Thomas Parker,
U.S. Navy and
Col Warren Parker,
USMC(Ret), Naval
Institute Proceedings,
February 2019**

The era of modern cyber warfare arguably had its origins in World War II when the Allies successfully broke Axis codes and enjoyed an intelligence advantage for much of the war. Perhaps the most illustrative historical example of how cyber savvy and leadership can influence operational outcomes was ADM Chester Nimitz's use of such code-gathered information in the lead-up to the Battle of Midway (4–7 June 1942).¹²

In the months following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Japan continued with a string of victories and seemed unstoppable. By the spring of 1942, in the Pacific, Japanese naval and air power outgunned American forces in every category. An anticipated confrontation in the Pacific loomed. This is where ADM Nimitz's cryptographic and intelligence leadership came into play in ways that possibly turned the Pacific War in favor of the Allies.

Nimitz gave credence to the intelligence analysis that the Japanese were preparing to massively attack and seize the Midway Atoll. Nimitz's certainty was such that he resisted those who believed the Japanese thrust was more likely elsewhere (e.g., the Philippines, Alaska, or the U.S. west coast) and authorized fleet operations that ultimately surprised and defeated vastly superior Japanese forces, sending four Japanese carriers to the bottom.

Fast forward to 7 May 2021: A cyberattack shut down the 5,500-mile Colonial Pipeline, disabling energy operations that supply 45 percent of the East Coast's energy needs—one of several such events during a relatively short time span.¹³ It is impossible to overstate the critical nature of the cyber world in today's military strategic and tactical thinking and operations, not to mention in the entire intelligence field.¹⁴ Many cyber observers contend that America is at war—a cold or even hot war—where targeting U.S. cyber systems (i.e., the preferred “missiles” and “bombs” in the information domain) is the new normal in warfare.

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Reasonable fluency in a wide range of cyber assets, capabilities, and threats will be ever more integral to leadership.¹⁵ Commanders must understand their unit's vulnerability to a multitude of possible cyberattacks and how to mitigate and recover from them. Moreover, the same leader must comprehend how and to what effect our forces can deliver cyber blows against adversaries, large and small.

- The cyber field is a vast and growing area where experts constantly publish books and articles. Military professionals must navigate these cyber waters carefully to educate themselves about basic and innovative issues.
- Commanders and leaders at all levels should actively seek to attend formal cyber training, whether as part of a larger academic curriculum or a stand-alone course. Remaining current is a must.

- As the 1942 Nimitz example illustrates, leaders do not have to be cyber experts, but they do need to understand threats and capabilities.
- Be ready to deploy your “cyber assets” in offensive and defensive operations.
- Be attuned to enemy cyber deception possibilities.

Practice #6

Aggressively seek out new challenges with enthusiasm: *Those who seek responsibility and those who embrace the most difficult, often dangerous, tasks with gusto are leaders by their nature, and they should heed that call.*

Accept the challenges so that you can feel the exhilaration of victory. A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week. You need to overcome the tug of people against you as you reach for high goals.

—George S. Patton

Timidity is the antithesis of leadership. Military leaders must be bold, daring, and always smart. Tackling challenges is an indispensable aspect of leading, and here are some specific considerations when seeking challenges.

- Be a volunteer. Show a readiness to take charge and a willingness to lead, especially when it might feel more comfortable to stay on the sidelines.
- Understand what the parameters are; do not over-promise.
- See challenges through to a finish.

Conclusion

Taken together, traditional and innovative thinking in the American

military drive the need for seamless integration of the six tangible leadership practices addressed in this article. Every Marine should aspire to retain a meaningful understanding of the fourteen traditional traits and eleven principles while incorporating these six practices into everyday living. Moreover, no Marine should make the mistake of believing that leadership is “formula driven” or simply a matter of trying to imitate older or more successful leaders. Effective leaders will exemplify all or most of the Marine Corps’ leadership traits and principles while striving to adopt our six practices through a lifetime of serious reflection and service to Corps and the Nation.

Notes

1. This article is not to be confused with “6 Traits of Effective Leaders,” published in *HR Daily Advisor* at hrdailyadvisors.com, 21 May 2014. Its conclusions are sound, but its thesis addresses mostly general principles that, for example, relate to such intangibles as character and intelligence.

2. See Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory & Practice*, 9th Ed, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018). Although the term “critical thinking” is in vogue in both military and civilian leadership publications, there appears to be no authoritative or generally accepted definition. For purposes here, critical thinking is the practice of combining experiential, logical, cognitive,

creative, academic, and contemplative abilities into well-conceived rational output.

3. Jim Collins, Forward to Thomas Kolditz, Libby Gilland Ryan P. Brown, *Leadership Reckoning: Can Higher Education Develop the Leaders We Need?* (Oklahoma City, OK: Monocle Press, 2021).

4. Ibid.

5. As R.M. Stogdill pointed out long ago in *Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Theory and Research*, there are numerous definitions of leadership. *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century*, J.C. Rost found over 200 different definitions used in various writings between 1900 and 1990.

6. See Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCPD 7, Learning*, (Washington, DC: February 2020). Especially Chapter 4, “The Learning Leader.”

7. See Thomas A. Kolditz, *In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It*, (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass 2007).

8. Betio is the tiny island in the Tarawa Atoll in which the battle’s main action took place.

9. Timothy S. McWilliams, “Marine Corps Leadership,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: July 2019).

10. See Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction, *CJCSI 1800.01F, Officer Professional Military Education Policy*, (Washington, DC: May 2020).

11. Reed Bonadonna, *How to Think Like an Officer*, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2020).

12. See Gordon Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, (New York, NY: Open Road Media, 1982).

13. See Ariel Cohen, “Pipeline Cyber Attack Demands Reevaluation of U.S. Infrastructure Security,” *Forbes*, (May 2021), available at <https://www.forbes.com>.

14. See, e.g., Department of Defense, *SUMMARY: Department of Defense Cyber Strategy*, (Washington, DC September 2018); Department of Energy, “Cyber Security is National Security,” (Washington, DC: October 2020); Megan Brennan, “Cyberterrorism Tops List of 11 Potential Threats to U.S.,” *Gallup*, (March 2021), available at <https://www.gallup.com>; and Erica Borghard, Mark Montgomery, and Brandon Valeriano, “The Challenge of Educating The Military on Cyber Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, (June 2021), available at <https://warontherocks.com>.

15. Brandon Valeriano, Benjamin Jensen, and Ryan C. Maness, *Cyber Strategy: The Evolving Character of Power and Coercion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); see Herbert Lin and Amy Zegart, *Bytes, Bombs and Spies: The Strategic Dimensions of Offensive Cyber Operations*, (Washington, DC: Washington Institution Press, 2018).

