

CARING

The 15th leadership trait

by SgtMaj William J. Singleton, USMCR (Ret)

“They won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care!” Over the

course of years of service to others, I have learned that the greatest trait a leader can possess is caring. While I have always been a firm believer in the completeness of the Marine Corps’ list of leadership traits and principles, I recommend we add one more trait: caring. I do not make this recommendation lightly. I have done much studying—both formal and informal—on the topic of leadership throughout the years, I have had many discussions with those who were well-versed on the subject, as well as those who were excellent practitioners of it. One common thread that I found was that I was always able to associate what the person I was speaking with was saying or what I was reading to one or more of the existing leadership principles or traits. This only reinforced for me that the leadership principles and traits, as they existed, were sound and foundationally complete.

Is It Worthy?

So why would it be fitting and beneficial to add the additional trait of caring? I have read writings of others in the past who had proposed changing the listed traits, particularly in the form of adding ones. Once again, I came away from these with the opinion the proposed additional traits were either captured by what was already on the list or were of no additional value and could only lead to muddying the pureness of the existing ones. When the thought occurred to me that the trait of caring should be added, I began to consider its soundness as a leadership trait and whether it was of any significant added value. In my deliberations, I used three litmus tests to vet caring as a leadership trait.

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The three tests were: whether or not caring is an actual trait; whether caring is significantly different in definition or substance from the other traits already listed; and whether the trait of caring has shown itself to be of significant contribution to military and personal success.

Litmus Tests

Test #1

A trait is commonly defined as a distinguishing quality. Rather than being scientific, consideration of whether caring is a trait is empirically based. The fact is that people care about some things and not about others. The Marine Corps’ two stated purposes of leadership are mission accomplishment and troop welfare, with the focus of the former being the organization and the latter being its personnel. Keeping this in mind, a person could either care or not care about either one of these things. Most everyone will agree that it is quite evident in a person’s behavior and actions when they do or do not care about something, and that there are good or bad effects, both internally and externally, as a result of whether they care. Therefore, caring can thus be qualified as a distinguishing quality.

Test #2

The word caring is defined in terms of things like:

- being concerned about
- having regard or thought for
- exhibiting kindness or empathy toward.

In comparing these defining terms against the definitions for the existing fourteen leadership traits of justice, judgment, dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, endurance, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and enthusiasm, none of them are equivalent to caring. Quite to the contrary, caring can be seen as embodying all the others. For example, if one cares about the people they lead, they will be unselfish; they will be loyal toward the organization and its people; they will perform their work with enthusiasm.

Test #3

To determine whether caring contributes to military success, one needs to look no further than the Corps’ leadership principles. Each one of the principles requires a proactive effort or action on the leader’s part. Because of this, caring is a contributory factor, if not the direct motivation for each and every one of the principles. You must first care to want to set the example, know yourself and seek self-improvement, know your people and look out for their welfare. A person who does not care will take no action or make any effort. You can also look at many of the books that have been on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List for how important the trait of caring is to military success. *I’m Staying With My Boys*, *My Men Are My Heroes*, and *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* are just some of the books that indicate the trait of caring in their very titles.

As far as personal life success is concerned, caring is the basis of all action. Caring is the impetus behind people's actions, whether it involves their personal well-being or the welfare of others. A perfect example of this is child-rearing, which in many ways is like leadership in the military. A parent both praises and rewards their child when they do well and scolds or disciplines them when they behave badly. A parent does this because they want their child to grow up to be a good person and a good citizen. Parents want these things for their children because they believe that doing so is morally right and will best position their child to live a happy and successful life. Similarly, Marine leaders care for their Marines by being involved with all aspects of their lives, with the desired end state of growing a Marine who will be a good person, serve the organization well, and return to civilian life as a good citizen.

Who Cares?

Caring has always been a key ingredient in leadership. I have observed and been the beneficiary of caring leaders throughout my life. I cannot pinpoint a person I would dare call a leader who I do not believe cared about the people they were leading. As largely Type A personality people, Marines tend to get a funny feeling about using the word caring regarding the people they lead. Some leaders perceive caring as a touchy-feely thing that involves codling and overly personal relationships. Other leaders perceive caring as an excuse to protect their people from the normal hardships of life and military service and the consequences of their behavior. Both are superficial and misguided views of what caring is.

There are two types of caring. There is external caring—the type a person exhibits toward others or things. If a leader cares about others, he will do positive things like teach, train, counsel, mentor, and develop them. Conversely, the leader will actively work to avoid negative actions on their or their subordinate leaders' part, like neglecting subordinates' issues or development, attempting to get ahead at subordinates' expense, or utilizing

positional authority to satisfy personal ends vice organizational ones. The second type of caring is internal caring; the type of caring a person has for and about themselves. If a leader cares about their followers, they will or will not do certain things where it concerns themselves as an individual. They will do

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positive things like professional study and preparation, maintaining physical and mental health, and adhering to good morals and values, while at the same time consciously staying away from negative things like compromising situations, questionable activities, and self-indulgence.

The concept of these two types of caring is further reinforced by the Marine Corps leadership principles. The individual principles can be viewed as falling into one of two categories. One category is what a leader should do for their people (i.e., external to the leader). This category contains the principles of:

- Know your Marines and look out for their welfare.
- Keep your Marines informed.
- Ensure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.
- Train your Marines as a team.
- Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates.
- Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities.

The other category is what a leader should do with respect to themselves (i.e., internal to the leader). This category contains the principles of:

- Know yourself and seek self-improvement.
- Be technically and tactically proficient.
- Set the example.
- Make sound and timely decisions.
- Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions.

In leadership, whether caring is external or internal, it is always defined by the effect it has on people other than the leader. This is supported by the timeless adage that all leadership is servant leadership. External caring originates from the respect and admiration a leader has for those who willingly submit them-

selves to another for a greater cause, even at the price of their free will and the risk of life. Internal caring originates from a leader's understanding that the life and welfare of the men and women that they lead has been faithfully entrusted to them by their parents and family, as well as the Marine Corps and followers themselves. This trust is based upon the implicit belief that the leader will not want to waste the efforts or life of their followers. Both types of caring are equally important as they provide the best overall leadership when symbiotic.

Conclusion

While the bedrock principles and ideas upon which the Marine Corps has achieved success remain unchanged, time does advance. Similarly, the foundational leadership traits that the Corps has espoused for many decades have remained unchanged in their validity. Caring is an integral part of human nature and has always been present in the leadership of human beings, especially in the profession of combat arms. The time has come to formally recognize caring as indispensable to leadership by adding it to the Corps' list of leadership traits. What if we DID C JJ TIE BUCKLE?



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