Leadership Lessons from *A Message to Garcia*

The art of learning
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Elbert Hubbard's short story, entitled *A Message to Garcia,* has enjoyed widespread acclaim within military and business circles for many years. The story takes place during the Spanish-American War and chronicles the noteworthy actions of a young officer named Lieutenant Rowan. During the climax of the War, President William McKinley sends Rowan on a mission deep into the Cuban jungle to "carry a message to [General] Garcia," the leader of the insurgent forces. After receiving these pithy instructions from President McKinley, Rowan immediately acts to carry out the mission without hesitation. The author praises Rowan's actions and suggests that he should "be cast in deathless bronze" with a "statue placed in every college in the land."

Most readers focus on the qualities of initiative, fidelity, and responsibility that are hallmarks of dependable subordinates; however, this story contains lessons for leaders as well. In particular, the author's interpretation of the story reinforces three misconceptions about leadership: first, that leaders can "get by" with poorly crafted guidance; second, that leaders should discourage critical thinking and creativity; and third, that leaders should expect perfection in pursuit of the mission.

During training at Officer Candidates School, instructors are keen to emphasize the preferred paradigm for tasking subordinates, which is com-monly referred to as the "5 W's" (ie, who, what, where, when, and why?). Every task given by a leader should include these components. The most important element of a task is the "why" portion because it encapsulates the intent of the leader. *MCDP 1*: *Warfighting,* summarizes the importance of communicating clear intent: "While a situation may change, making the task obsolete, the intent is more lasting and continues to guide our actions." Ultimately, it is incumbent upon good leaders to provide thorough guidance when issuing their task and purpose statement. President McKinley's directive to "carry a message to Garcia" is woefully inadequate in meeting this standard.

A Message to Garcia also dismisses the value of critical thinking. At one point, Hubbard shares an anecdote about an office clerk who is given a broad assignment from his manager to "make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Corregio." The clerk responds by asking, "Where is the Encyclopedia?" "What do you want to know for?" and "Is there any hurry?" Hubbard labels these questions as "idiotic" and states the clerk's actions represent "moral stupidity." Rather than castigate questioning minds, good leaders will celebrate creative thinking and encourage subor-dinates to ask relevant questions when appropriate.

Finally, Hubbard's leadership model is flawed because it expects perfection from subordinates. In the preface to his article, Hubbard says that initiative is defined as "doing the right thing without being told." Doing the right thing might not always be feasible for an individual executing a mission with limited resources and knowledge about the situation. Leaders who uphold a zero-defect standard of success undermine the creative judgment of their subordinates by instilling fear of failure. Effective leaders recognize that initiative requires human judgment, and human judgment is almost never perfect. Nonetheless, as GEN George S. Patton noted, "A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week."

In each of the examples cited above, Lieutenant Rowan did not complete the mission because of good leadership, but rather in spite of poor leadership. *A Message to Garcia* offers a poignant reminder to avoid common leadership pitfalls and to constantly seek self-improvement while serving and leading the Marines entrusted to our care.

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