

# Unprofessional Leadership

How professionalism and genuine leadership collide

by Capt Austin M. Lynum

Throughout the officer training pipeline, we are exposed to a wide array of leadership styles, capabilities, and personalities. Some talk about Theodore Roosevelt, Chesty, and Gen Mattis. Some talk like the horse from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*: "I will work harder," seems to be their only mantra. Other leaders turn to stoic philosophy, citing Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and others. Regardless of their inspiration, every guest speaker, lecturer, and case study has the same undertone: *don't let the weakness out*. Got it, do not be weak, be strong, and get stronger.

As company-grade officers often do, my peers and I have often discussed the challenges we regularly face. We often talk about how we were taught to be professional, and how professionalism seems to be the art behind *don't let the weakness out*. Oddly enough, professionalism is often associated with the concept of genuine leadership—also supported by those same guest speakers and case studies that support traditional professionalism—which focuses on being yourself, providing the style of leadership that is natural for you, and involving and familiarizing yourself with the concerns of your Marines. It is about showing your humanity and being open and honest about yourself with your Marines, in the hopes that it creates the right team environment to expedite mission accomplishment.

In light of our inherent human flaws, how are leaders—specifically our cadre of young officers—supposed to be not just genuine, but also professional?

For some of us, leadership has nothing to do with rank, status, privilege,

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or any other material or social benefit we may receive. What matters is sharing and supporting trust, life, reality, joy, and pain. What makes leadership worth all the stress, late nights, and administrivia is seeing the real problems Marines face and helping them through those problems. Hopefully, we help them grow along the way. So, in line with genuine leadership and our purpose for pursuing leadership positions, Marine leaders must deliberately emphasize genuine leadership, at the expense of traditional views on professionalism, by supporting the higher-order needs of their Marines, building trust through vulnerability, and creating autotelic experiences through effort and attitude.

As America's longest wars ended in the early 2020s, the Marine Corps emphasized readiness across the force in preparation for the next fight. This drive toward readiness included efforts to support the wellness of Marines—often focused on the professionalism of their leadership—but we still see high rates of addiction, suicide, and mental health concerns within our ranks.

Why can Marines not speak up about their own needs in the workplace? In part, this paradox can be explained by the societal image we have of Marines. Recruiting posters and our own vocabulary paint us as larger-than-life soldiers of the sea, somewhere between myth

and legend in the American psyche, who are stronger, faster, smarter, and more lethal than the run-of-the-mill American. This may be the case, but it shows only the organization's shell, without showing its meat—without showing the *how* behind the *what*. How could that organization have members with weaknesses, petty personal issues, and mental problems?

What is the standard answer The Basic School lieutenants give when asked what they want to do in the Marine Corps? It is always the same—lead Marines. Some of the reasons why they want to lead Marines are because of that organizational shell I addressed earlier, where Marines will always find a way to get the job done through grit, determination, and sheer force of personality. Even so, there is no hard shell to the sentiment behind those two simple words. To elaborate more on the meat of the Marine Corps, we need to go back to the basics of humanity.

Each one of us has basic human needs, like food, water, air, and shelter. There are also less basic needs, like safety, social interaction, belonging, esteem, and purpose. These higher-order needs are more nebulous, and the specifics of these needs vary from person to person.

In today's world, all our more basic needs are met with relative ease, at least for most of us in the Western world. This, for some of us, makes life feel

fake, hollow, boring, and depressing. At the end of every day, we close our eyes thinking, *is that it?*

Is this all life is supposed to be? A series of easy, simple, repetitive tasks to fulfill our basic human needs? I hear stories of the trials of the past, where mankind had to fight every day for their tomorrow. The risks were real, the reward was real, and the experience was undeniably real. Some of us even had similar experiences in our own life. These experiences call to us from our genes and our memory, adding severity to our judgment of this empty world until that emptiness becomes a nagging malevolence, taunting us to face more and more difficult challenges to prove ourselves as worthy descendants of our very real and true ancestors.

Leadership may not be the answer to this challenge, but it is the closest thing some of us can find to this experience. Like the lives of our ancestors, our experiences with leadership are full of struggle, pain, worry, and distress. Also, like the lives of our ancestors, we have experienced triumph, relief, truth, beauty, and joy in leadership. You cannot deny the reality of the situation when a Marine about to end active service enters your office with tears in his eyes and an acceptance letter to the college of his choice and thanks you for helping him navigate the application process. Neither can you deny the pain in the eyes of a staff non-commissioned officer who confides in you that his wife is leaving and taking the kids with her. Or when your Marine recounts to you the death of a best friend that has shocked them so much it has led to a decade-long addiction.

As extreme as these experiences are to both the Marines and their leader, and how undeniable the raw emotion, I cannot help but feel that the true value of these leadership situations is in the sharing of vulnerability, the trust exercised, and the trust gained. Somehow, these completely unmeasurable qualities are the guarantors of the reality of the situation.

None of these situations above are easily explained by recruiters, and none of them have to do with being physically tough. They have everything to do

with soft skills and the relationships we all crave as human beings. That is why Marines understand the sentiment behind *'Til Valballa*, and why the stories of gunnery sergeants, master sergeants, and first sergeants elicit a hushed silence when they turn to the loss of a friend. Therefore, the table prepared for our fallen comrades is sacred, regardless of whether you have lost a friend in the Marine Corps.

There is no way to develop the soul of the Corps without the relationships that give meat to these stories, sayings, and settings. Further, there is no way to develop these deep, meaningful relationships without sharing the everyday victories, failures, pleasures, and pains of life. Deliberately withhold your life from those you would lead, and you will automatically make conditions ripe for them to do the same.

In this way, keep in mind the needs of the Marines while you also deal with your task—to provide for the needs of the Marine Corps by accomplishing the mission.

From my conversations with young Marines, they often believe their leaders only care about the exceptional performers in the unit, usually because they are our bid for success to accomplish the mission. While there is some truth to this, it is correlative, not causative. In other words, their performance is not the reason why we care about top performers. What we truly care about is effort and attitude. When we see effort and attitude, it is usually in the top performers, because effort and the right attitude are almost always enough to propel someone to the top ten percent of any team.

At first glance, this makes attitude and effort sound like a zero-sum game, where the effort of others, if it outweighs yours, will block you from the elite of your unit or team. That is where attitude comes in. If you have the right attitude, you will not be threatened by the success of others. Instead, you will view it as a benefit for your section and unit, and you will use it as a template for your own success. If others in your unit have the right attitude, you will love the experience so much that you do not care what your status is—*so long as you get to be part of the team.*

In short, effort and attitude, when combined, are your ticket to the top of your reporting senior's profile and to a better work environment.

This is the environment where we see exponential growth, where work turns into what's called an *autotelic* experience. Autotelic is derived from two Greek words: *auto*, which means "self," and *telos*, which means "goal." Autotelic experiences are experiences that are both the action and the reward for that action, simultaneously, where the *thing* is not the reward, but the *process* is. Think of an avid snowboarder the day after a fresh snowfall. Nobody needs to argue with him to get on the hill. More than likely, you will have to argue with him to get off the hill, because he is exactly where he wants to be in life. If winter sports do not connect with you, imagine a marathon runner, who enjoys the run not for the medal at the finish line, but for every single step along those 26.2 miles. In these autotelic experiences, success becomes automatic, and even the most nearsighted sensation seeker will put in excessive, productive work just to maintain the experience. And because of this, those workaholic, future-focused, "delayed gratification" types among us will avoid the burnout we are so prone to because the feedback is frequent and rewarding.

This is the environment we all hope for. It is the team that we are proud to be part of and contribute to.

Be genuine by being dependable and honest, listening to the concerns of those around you, and building the team through effort and attitude. This all sounds like advice for staff non-commissioned officer and junior Marines, but it is just as applicable to lieutenants and captains. Each of us leads our subordinates while also acting as subordinates to our leaders. Our Marines are observant, so how we act as subordinates to our leaders will set the tone for how our Marines act as our subordinates. Therefore, we must give the requisite effort and attitude to build our leadership teams into the teams we want them to be. Be the Marine you want to lead, and your Marines will build the team you want to lead.

