

Marine Corps Leadership

The legacy of development and recommendations for the future
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History demonstrates that effective leadership can be the difference between success or failure. Recognizing this, Major General John Archer Lejeune laid a foundation for Marine Corps leadership development that has lasted almost a century. Along with his leadership philosophy, the leadership definition attributed to Lejeune and the subsequent list of leadership traits and principles have withstood the test of time and guided generations of Marines in war and peace. In fact, both leadership scholars and practitioners alike have studied Marine Corps' leadership and made it the subject of numerous research papers and articles. Many tried to emulate it. Although this Marine Corps leadership foundation, now encapsulated in *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*, and *MCRP 6-11D*,

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Sustaining the Transformation,¹ is still relevant today, Marine Corps leadership development has neither kept pace with the Corps' leadership needs nor stayed true to Lejeune's leadership philosophy. First, the demands of today's complex, increasingly global, and rapidly changing strategic environment requires a wider variety of knowledge and skills to navigate this complexity. Second, the Marines United scandal, incidents of hazing, abuse, sexual assault, and leader misconduct not only reflects a disturbing trend in toxic, immoral, and self-serving behaviors that invites more of the same, but also erodes morale,

causes Marines to lose confidence in their leaders, and tarnishes the Corps' reputation. Third, our newest generation of Marines—and the one following behind—expect more from their leaders and the organizations of which they are a part of. The time has come to upgrade Marine Corps leadership development to meet today's leadership challenges in a way that rekindles the spirit of Lejeune's leadership philosophy.

Rethinking Leadership Development

Much has changed in the study and practice of leadership over the last 100 years. Not only have new perspectives on leadership enriched our thinking, but scholars have significantly increased our understanding of human behavior and relationships, the social systems that bind us together, and the greater strategic environment in which we all exist. 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. As science has expanded, so too has our understanding of leadership. Unfortunately, little of this is reflected in Marine Corps leadership development. Although last year's *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, sought to provide a holistic framework for leadership development by incorporating six functional areas into Marine leader development (fidelity, fighter, fitness, fam-



Marine Corps leadership needs to go back and study Gen Lejeune's leadership philosophy.
(Photo by LCpl Jon Gonzalez.)

ily, finances, and future), this must be viewed as only the beginning.² To better prepare Marines for today's complex and rapidly changing operating environment, improve leadership competence, and build strong moral character, the following four recommendations support "sustaining the transformation" and contribute to a holistic leadership development framework.

Adopt a Corps-wide transformational leadership philosophy. Transformational leadership is a moral, purpose-driven leadership that achieves results by developing people, teams, and organizations to achieve their full potential. At the heart of this is the relationship between the leader and those they lead. Gen Lejeune recognized this, writing:

The relationship between officers and men should in no sense be that of superior and inferior, nor that of master and servant, but rather that of teacher and scholar. In fact, it should partake of the nature of the relationship between father and son, to the extent that officers, especially commanding officers, are responsible for the physical, mental, and moral welfare, as well as the discipline and military training of the young men under their command.³

This statement not only provides a glimpse into his own personal leadership philosophy but, combined with his numerous transformative actions, proves that our thirteenth commandant was a transformational leader long before anyone defined the term. All Marines can learn from his philosophy and legacy.

Over the past 40 years, scholars found that transformational leadership is more effective in the long-term because it fosters commitment, motivation, effort, and job satisfaction that results in sustainable performance. This is why it is the preferred leadership approach or philosophy for many organizations, including Georgetown University's *Institute for Transformational Leadership*. Unfortunately, too often Marines apply a "drill instructor" leadership style for every situation. Though it may have its place in military leadership, it is the antithesis of the "teacher and scholar" model that Lejeune advocated, and—when over used—it is not effective in the long run. Adopting a clearly articu-

lated Corps-wide transformational leadership philosophy does four things:

- It sets a standard and expectation for Marine Corps leadership that institutionalizes the "teacher and scholar" model.
- It fosters both a leadership identity and mindset that applies to every aspect of a Marine's life.
- It encourages Marines to develop their own personal leadership philosophy.
- It better meets the needs of new generations of Marines who, as research shows, want leaders they can trust, opportunities to grow, and a healthy climate.

Although Marines take on different roles and employ different techniques as the situation requires, a transformational leadership philosophy gives all Marines a strategy for long-term effective leadership that will guide them in a variety of different situations, helps them remain true to who they are, and ultimately empowers them to make a positive difference in the lives of others.

Enable self-mastery. Effective transformational leadership begins with self-mastery. While both Marine Corps Leadership Principle 2, "Know yourself and seek self-improvement," and *MCO 1500.61* infer this idea, self-mastery encompasses so much more. Also known as self-leadership, self-mastery is the ability to influence one's thinking, behaviors, and attitudes to do one's best or achieve goals and desired outcomes. Central to this is developing effective habits that contribute to success in all areas of one's life and embody the traits and principles Marines hold dear. Effective self-leadership begins with *self-awareness*, a process that extends far beyond merely knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, but to know one's values, beliefs, motivations, and other core factors that reflect one's true character and unique qualities that make him who he is. The second aspect of self-leadership is *situational awareness*, which not only helps Marines understand who they are in a greater world but also understand what is going on around them at multiple levels. *Personal management* is the aspect of self-leadership and addresses both long-term personal planning and

establishing effective daily practices and behaviors that keep one on track and find balance. *MCO 1500.61* addresses this in part. The fourth aspect of self-leadership is *personal development*, the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and experience that contribute to competence. *Self-discipline* is the final aspect of self-leadership and focuses on turning effective behaviors into effective habits. This includes the ability to focus on priorities, generate self-motivation, and maintain self-control. Enabling self-mastery not only improves confidence and competence but also helps Marines be more adaptable, resilient, and successful.

Incorporate values-based character development in all training. Given the recent string of moral and ethical violations across the Marine Corps, it seems that the core values of honor, courage, and commitment are lost on many Marines. Some experts contend that this reflects a moral vacuum where people adopt their values from their own self-serving interests and do what is right in their own eyes. As we can already see, this narcissistic behavior not only harms our Marines and reputation, but it also contributes to an unethical culture. If left unchecked, this problem also has the potential to hinder our ability to win our Nation's battles. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan illustrated, winning the support of local populations is necessary to ultimately win the wars. The 2004 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses remind us how such behavior can undermine our efforts to win the hearts and minds of the local populations and ultimately win the wars. The bottom line is that we can no longer accept a self-serving culture of "what happens on deployment stays on deployment," because it simply never does. Lejeune understood this, contending that "good conduct . . . be done with reference to civilian inhabitants of foreign countries in which Marines are serving."

Leading by example, Gen Lejeune was often praised as a man of integrity and good character. He repeatedly underscored the importance of moral character in his writings and incorporated this in authoring our Corps' leadership definition:



The Marine Corps' success has been the result of foresight and innovation. (Photo by LCpl Antonio Garcia.)

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.⁴

Moral character, as Lejeune intended, is the product of values-based character development and not the rules-based ethics training Marines endure today. Although moral psychologists demonstrated that rules-based ethics training does not guarantee people will obey the rules, the string of recent ethical violations makes this point painfully clear. Only by incorporating values-based character development into our leadership development programs can we move beyond the current ethics crisis. Doing so will not only flush out the meaning of honor, courage, and commitment, but it will equip Marines with the values and principles to make moral decisions in situations not covered by existing laws and rules while helping them to cultivate both a moral identity and a desire to the right thing.

Cultivate strategic and creative problem-solving skills. We must remember that much of the Corps' success was built on foresight and innovation. Lejeune himself was a visionary who successfully led important transformational change in an earlier area of rapid change. His efforts laid the foundation

for successful endeavors in World War II and included developing war plans for the Pacific in the 1920s and 1930s. Gen Robert B. Neller, in proclaiming his innovation challenge, recognizes the need to continue this legacy of foresight and innovation. This requires strategic and creative problem-solving skills that foster a global perspective and a holistic understanding of the world we live in.

Because we are in the business of winning our Nation's battles, improving every Marine's strategic and creative problem-solving skills is essential to our success. Such skills include specific techniques and ways of thinking that enable Marines to both see things differently and think differently, allowing them to make sense out of the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that exists in the strategic environment. Central to this is helping Marines view the strategic environment holistically, identify the various elements and the linear and non-linear relationships between them, and recognize the emerging conditions and trends as well as the effects they will have across the strategic environment. This enables Marines to envision the possible outcomes, formulate viable solutions to emerging problems, and better plan for the future—even if that future is the next six months in a hostile area of

operations. In a tactical environment, strategic and creative problem solving skills not only help Marines generate new ideas that lead to new innovative outcomes—such as novel solutions to emerging problems or threats, improvements to existing equipment, processes, and methods, or radical new ways of doing things—but also improve mental agility and adaptability: their OODA loop. This is important when our adversaries are adaptable, innovative, and technologically adept.

Conclusion

To meet the leadership needs of the future, we can no longer accept the status quo and must step up our game. A century ago, Marine Corps leadership development was forward thinking and was truly ahead of its time. Yet, while our tactics, techniques, and technology have gone through continuous improvement, Marine Corps leadership development struggles to meet our Marines' needs today. By equipping Marines with knowledge and skills that will benefit them in all areas of their life and meet their needs for growth, we will improve our force. The key to success in this, however, is to introduce this knowledge and awareness of these skills to emerging leaders early in their careers and cultivate them so that Marines can develop proficiency over time.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-10, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: May 2018); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCRP 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, (Washington, DC: June 1999).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, (Washington, DC: July 2017).
3. MajGen John A. Lejeune, Letter to The Officers of the Marine Corps, (Washington, DC: September 1922).
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Manual*, (Washington, DC: 1980).

