

2026 Gen Robert E. Hogaboom Leadership Writing Contest: Second Place

Teach Them How to Say Goodbye

The overlooked leadership aspect of teaching Marines how to leave well

by LtCol Nicolas L. Martinez

I usually surprise people when I tell them I loved my time at the Pentagon. I had a great three years in the five-sided puzzle palace. The going-away gift from my peers reads: “To The Happiest Major at the Pentagon.” I genuinely enjoyed the work and the opportunity to make a positive impact on the Service while engaging with senior leaders and retired Marines alike. However, what I loved most about my time at the Pentagon was what I learned. My observations on leadership, mentorship, being a staff officer, and senior leaders’ decision-making processes have proved invaluable to me.

The most important leadership lesson I gained from my time at the Pentagon is that you must know how to end one’s service well. I encountered many senior leaders (civilian and military) who were sadly arriving at the end of their very long careers of service, frankly wrecked. Many of them completed their service without ever seeing that promotion, assignment, or command they desperately wanted and believed would make their careers fulfilling or bring happiness. Others were divorced or estranged from their spouse and kids while navigating anger and loss at their career’s end. Some were just physically broken with health issues that were never resolved, and their bodies were neglected. In short, they felt bitter and disillusioned while struggling to understand what their service meant.

Leaders need to teach Marines *how to say goodbye well* by mentoring them

>LtCol Martinez is currently serving as the Joint Logistics Operations Chief for Defense Logistics Agency CENTCOM and SOCOM in Tampa, FL.

to keep the end in mind, set goals, and distinguish between urgent and important. This mentorship guidance can make the difference between completing service with pride and gratitude or bitterness and frustration. We often overlook this aspect of leadership because it requires leaders to proactively guide Marines through something they have not yet experienced themselves—leaving the Corps.

Start With the End in Mind

To teach and lead Marines to say goodbye well, a leader needs to start before the service member even considers departing the Corps—because to leave well, one must first serve well. How each Marine navigates their service—setbacks, failures, departures, and changes—shapes their ability to leave with pride and gratitude. The Marine Corps is a continuous line of generations, and as Chesty Puller reminds us, “Old breed? New breed? There’s not a damn bit of difference so long as it’s the Marine breed.” The true legacy exists in how we mentor younger Marines, sharing our wisdom and experience so they may serve—and eventually leave well.

As leaders, we must start with the end in mind for every Marine, even the newest among us. Mentorship needs to include honest conversations from

the outset, encouraging Marines to envision the legacy they want to create. “To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.”¹ By helping Marines reflect on their future from the start, we guide them toward a service they can look back on with pride.

While at the Pentagon, a leader started with the end in mind during my initial counseling. He asked me, “How much time do you have left?” I promptly answered with the number of years until I reached my twenty years for retirement. I thought I was keeping the end in mind. He laughed, expecting my answer. “No, that’s not what I’m asking. How much more time do you have until your daughter is eighteen and out of the house, and your opportunities to be a part of her life and be her parent are reduced to a fraction, with the odd phone call or visits? That’s your real countdown, and don’t you forget it.” I was dumbstruck by the frank fatherly counsel and mentorship. His mentorship changed my family dynamic in one counseling session and reframed how I placed the end in mind. Family will help with the career transition

and serve as a bridge, but it requires Marines to ensure their family is still there at the end. As leaders, we need to set the right example of keeping the end in mind and lead frank discussions with our Marines on the topic.

Goal Setting

Leaders need to encourage Marines to set goals they own and control, which are separate from specific achievements, assignments, promotions, or commands. I recall, while

make a difference to all those around him. Modern-day philosopher Ryan Holiday describes this stoic principle more succinctly: “A wise person knows what’s inside their circle of control and what is outside of it.”² In other words, goals are great because they provide direction and challenges to rise to. However, if your goal involves someone else giving you something (falling in love with you, promoting you, giving you a job), it is not entirely in your control, and you have turned over control of

issues that needed attention, but he needed me to focus on the important issues that were larger and more impactful for the command. He expected me not to get caught up in the urgent, trivial items of the day, but to stay focused on the important aspects of leading, impacting the unit’s mission, being an officer, being a father and husband, taking care of my health, and never neglecting the Marines in need. In other words, we also embody other roles for those around us, and they need us to show up in those roles too. If we fail to take care of the family, ourselves, or our Marines for the sake of a quick email request for information, an ill-conceived meeting, or a PowerPoint presentation, we are choosing the urgent over the important.

In his famous article, “Urgent vs. Important,” COL Mark Blum, USA (Ret.), provides a simple rubric to guide decisions when your roles have competing demands:

1. Is the event important to someone important to you?
2. Would your physical presence make a difference?
3. Will this opportunity come around again?³

Looking back, I failed COL Blum’s test more often than I care to admit. However, the handful of times I passed the test were incredibly well worth it. By discussing how to differentiate between urgent and important, leaders guide Marines to make the right decision when it counts.

Conclusion

Alexander Hamilton serves as a great example of someone blinded by ambition in service who missed the legacy impacts he made along the way. Hamilton set his goal on commanding a battalion during the Revolutionary War. However, it was during his time as an aide to GEN Washington that he likely had his greatest impact supporting the war effort. He chose the urgent demands of his job as Secretary of the Treasury, which meant he missed his important role as a father and husband to his family. He defined his political career and legacy in terms of winning

Leaders need to encourage Marines to set goals they own and those they control, which are separate from ... achievements, assignments, promotions ...

at the Pentagon, encountering many great, smart Marines who were sadly bitter on retirement because they had been denied something along the way. Some were not selected for command, professional military education school, assignment, or promotion. So, they arrived at the end of their careers feeling disappointed because they had defined success as attaining something that someone else had to give them. In other words, their unfulfilled ambitions blinded them and kept them from leaving with grace and gratitude.

Meanwhile, I worked for one boss who set his goals elsewhere. He wanted to do impactful work, be the best teammate he could be, and provide stability for his family. I quickly saw that his goals were not the typical ambitious ones most people have. However, I also noticed that he came to work every day, enthusiastically ready to take on the most audacious challenges, no matter what, and to make a positive impact. People sought him out for advice and to work with him because of his goals. No work was ever beneath him nor his rank. He loved working and helping teammates in need. I enjoyed working for him, and his leadership inspired me to redefine success and my own goals. He did not receive the typical external recognition described (promotions, commands, assignments), but he did

your life and your independent, reasoned choices to someone else.

What should your goal be, then? I have had a few discussions that usually center on Marines asking me whether they should get out, apply for a new program, or seek command. I love these calls because they want to hear what I think they should do. Instead, I like to ask them these questions:

- Why did you join or re-enlist?
- Did you accomplish the reason you started or stayed in for? If yes, great! Leave with a happy heart.
- If not, are you on the right path to attain it, and is that still important to you?
- What does a successful career look like?

In these conversations, we conduct goal setting that is more direction and purpose setting—focused on effort and impact. By guiding Marines to set goals within their reasoned control, leaders enable them to leave on their terms with grace and gratitude.

“Urgent Vs Important”

In teaching Marines to leave well, leaders need to demonstrate and guide juniors in distinguishing between urgent and important. My initial counseling with another leader focused on this exact topic. He wanted me to know there would be urgent, high-demand

and serve as a bridge, but it requires Marines to ensure their family is still there at the end. As leaders, we need to set the right example of keeping the end in mind and lead frank discussions with our Marines on the topic.

Goal Setting

Leaders need to encourage Marines to set goals they own and control, which are separate from specific achievements, assignments, promotions, or commands. I recall, while

make a difference to all those around him. Modern-day philosopher Ryan Holiday describes this stoic principle more succinctly: “A wise person knows what’s inside their circle of control and what is outside of it.”² In other words, goals are great because they provide direction and challenges to rise to. However, if your goal involves someone else giving you something (falling in love with you, promoting you, giving you a job), it is not entirely in your control, and you have turned over control of

issues that needed attention, but he needed me to focus on the important issues that were larger and more impactful for the command. He expected me not to get caught up in the urgent, trivial items of the day, but to stay focused on the important aspects of leading, impacting the unit’s mission, being an officer, being a father and husband, taking care of my health, and never neglecting the Marines in need. In other words, we also embody other roles for those around us, and they need us to show up in those roles too. If we fail to take care of the family, ourselves, or our Marines for the sake of a quick email request for information, an ill-conceived meeting, or a PowerPoint presentation, we are choosing the urgent over the important.

In his famous article, “Urgent vs. Important,” COL Mark Blum, USA (Ret.), provides a simple rubric to guide decisions when your roles have competing demands:

1. Is the event important to someone important to you?
2. Would your physical presence make a difference?
3. Will this opportunity come around again?³

Looking back, I failed COL Blum’s test more often than I care to admit. However, the handful of times I passed the test were incredibly well worth it. By discussing how to differentiate between urgent and important, leaders guide Marines to make the right decision when it counts.

Conclusion

Alexander Hamilton serves as a great example of someone blinded by ambition in service who missed the legacy impacts he made along the way. Hamilton set his goal on commanding a battalion during the Revolutionary War. However, it was during his time as an aide to GEN Washington that he likely had his greatest impact supporting the war effort. He chose the urgent demands of his job as Secretary of the Treasury, which meant he missed his important role as a father and husband to his family. He defined his political career and legacy in terms of winning

Leaders need to encourage Marines to set goals they own and control, which are separate from ... achievements, assignments, promotions ...

at the Pentagon, encountering many great, smart Marines who were sadly bitter on retirement because they had been denied something along the way. Some were not selected for command, professional military education school, assignment, or promotion. So, they arrived at the end of their careers feeling disappointed because they had defined success as attaining something that someone else had to give them. In other words, their unfulfilled ambitions blinded them and kept them from leaving with grace and gratitude.

Meanwhile, I worked for one boss who set his goals elsewhere. He wanted to do impactful work, be the best teammate he could be, and provide stability for his family. I quickly saw that his goals were not the typical ambitious ones most people have. However, I also noticed that he came to work every day, enthusiastically ready to take on the most audacious challenges, no matter what, and to make a positive impact. People sought him out for advice and to work with him because of his goals. No work was ever beneath him nor his rank. He loved working and helping teammates in need. I enjoyed working for him, and his leadership inspired me to redefine success and my own goals. He did not receive the typical external recognition described (promotions, commands, assignments), but he did

your life and your independent, reasoned choices to someone else.

What should your goal be, then? I have had a few discussions that usually center on Marines asking me whether they should get out, apply for a new program, or seek command. I love these calls because they want to hear what I think they should do. Instead, I like to ask them these questions:

- Why did you join or re-enlist?
- Did you accomplish the reason you started or stayed in for? If yes, great! Leave with a happy heart.
- If not, are you on the right path to attain it, and is that still important to you?
- What does a successful career look like?

In these conversations, we conduct goal setting that is more direction and purpose setting—focused on effort and impact. By guiding Marines to set goals within their reasoned control, leaders enable them to leave on their terms with grace and gratitude.

“Urgent Vs Important”

In teaching Marines to leave well, leaders need to demonstrate and guide juniors in distinguishing between urgent and important. My initial counseling with another leader focused on this exact topic. He wanted me to know there would be urgent, high-demand

or losing against his opponents. However, it is the *Federalist Papers* that have survived the test of time. We, of course, know him for the untimely demise in a duel at the end, leaving life angry and bitter. In the musical *Hamilton*, the audience receives a poignant reminder of leaving well when George Washington retires to Mt. Vernon. Rather than giving a scorched-earth

the oldest Marine passes a piece of cake to the youngest Marine. *The passing of the cake from the oldest to the youngest Marine symbolizes the passing of history and traditions to the next generation.* The transfer of knowledge. This is why I loved my time at the Pentagon and always will. I learned how to say goodbye from leaders who took the time to mentor me and teach me their lessons

... Washington chooses instead to leave with grace and gratitude.

speech like Hamilton wants him to, Washington chooses instead to leave with grace and gratitude. From the musical, "I wanna talk about what I have learned. The hard-won wisdom I have earned ... And if we get this right, we're gonna teach 'em how to say Goodbye."

At the Marine Corps Birthday Ball,

on starting with the end in mind, setting goals, and distinguishing between urgent and important. Now, I am enormously grateful to be able to share my piece of cake with you. Semper Fidelis.

Notes

1. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989).
2. Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman, *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living* (New York: Penguin, 2016).
3. Mark Blum, "Urgent vs. Important," *AUSA Family Readiness*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/important-vs-urgent-col-mark-blum-commander-212th-field-brian-lilly>.
4. Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*, music, lyrics, and book by Lin-Manuel Miranda, directed by Thomas Kail, Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York, August 6, 2015.



CHOOSE THE MARINE CORPS GAZETTE

digital and/or print editions when you join the Marine Corps Association!

Check out our digital Gazette edition at www.mca-marines.org—it's an online version of our print edition. When you join MCA, you can order the digital edition or you can order the print edition and have complete access to the digital edition for one low rate.



SCAN THE QR CODE...

to start your membership today



CALL TOLL-FREE

1-866-622-1775

ORDER ONLINE

WWW.MCA-MARINES.ORG

MARINE CORPS
Gazette
Professional Journal of U.S. Marines

MARINE CORPS
ASSOCIATION
EST. 1913