

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

Two-Dimensional Leadership in the Infantry

Running between two extremes

by Sgt William P. Temple

Leadership in the infantry is often described in absolutes: hard or soft, tactical or administrative, aggressive or patient, mission-first or people-first. Young Marines enter the fleet expecting their leaders to exist at one of these poles; some idealized version of the stoic squad leader or the grizzled platoon sergeant who barks orders through the smoke of a field exercise. However, the longer I serve, the more I have come to understand that the infantry does not run on extremes. It runs on the tension between them. It runs on two dimensions of leadership: the visible and the unseen, the decisive and the quiet, the hard call and the human cost.

That truth did not come to me during a schoolhouse lecture or a professional military education discussion. It came on a night in the Verona Loop, a night so dark it swallowed depth perception, so humid our flaks clung to us like another layer of skin. We had been patrolling for hours, fighting mud, fatigue, and the frustration that comes from rehearsing the same lanes until boredom competes with discipline. A junior Marine fell behind, barely noticeable until the line subtly bent from his lag. I snapped at him, sharp, irritated, impatient, and he caught up, staring at the ground. He said nothing, but the way he moved afterward made something clear: I had fixed the problem

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tactically but broken something else in the process.

That moment stayed with me not because it was dramatic but because it revealed the gap between what infantry leaders think leadership is and what it actually demands. The infantry trains us to master the physical dimension, movement, marksmanship, planning, control of fires, and discipline of our formations. However, Marines do not march on tactics alone. They march on trust: the emotional dimension of leadership that no manual, no order, and no billet description can teach with certainty.

What I learned that night was simple: I had executed leadership in one dimension but abandoned the other.

And Marines feel the absence of the second one immediately.

Two-dimensional leadership is the ability to make the right tactical decision and sustain the human cohesion required to carry that decision through the mud, through the confusion, and

through the consequences. It is the leader who corrects firmly yet fairly, who can enforce standards without humiliating the Marine who failed to meet them. It is the ability to be lethal without becoming careless, demanding without becoming demeaning, calm without being passive, and aggressive without losing judgment.

Most leadership failures in the infantry do not happen during firefights or live-fire ranges. They occur in the gaps and the moments between actions, where Marines spend most of their time, and where leaders often fail to recognize the weight of their presence. These gaps include:

- The walk back to the trucks after a miserable range
- The hour before a field op, when morale begins to drift
- The first few minutes after a Marine screws up
- The silence after a harsh correction
- The days when training is repetitive, and motivation is thin

- The seconds when a leader decides whether to listen or dismiss
- The space after success, when the temptation to take credit quietly appears

No Marine writes fitness reports about those moments, but every Marine remembers which leaders handled them well and which leaders made them worse.

Two-dimensional leadership means understanding that the infantry never stops being human, even when we pretend it does. We ask Marines to patrol through jungle darkness, breach compounds, stand security at 0300, carry crew-served weapons until their shoulders ache, and accept that their lives may one day depend on orders they did not get to debate. That reality does not make them less human; it magnifies their humanity. The infantry leader who ignores that dimension may still accomplish the mission, but at a cost they often never see.

Marines will follow a one-dimensional leader, but they will not trust one. And without trust, our tactical decisions become executive without belief.

The infantry demands hardness, yes, but hardness is not cruelty. It demands discipline, but discipline is not humiliation. It demands decisiveness, but decisiveness is not emotional withdrawal. The best infantry leaders I have ever served with—platoon commanders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders, machine-gun section leaders, and team leaders—were not the loudest or the most dramatic.

They were the Marines who could look at a tired squad and know who needed pressure and who needed a quiet nudge; the ones who could sense when a Marine's frustration came from laziness and when it came from exhaustion; the ones who understood that intensity must be paired with empathy, or it becomes noise.

The infantry loves clear answers, but leadership is rarely clear. It is two-dimensional, always. In the field, you are a tactician, but you are also a witness to your Marines' fears, ambitions, insecurities, and potential. In garrison, you are an administrator, but you are

also a role model whose smallest habits are absorbed by every junior Marine who watches you. Your Marines see both dimensions, whether you want them to or not.

The night in the Verona Loop ended without drama. We finished the lane, conducted our debrief, and moved back to the tents. Hours later, the Marine I snapped at approached me, not confrontational, not resentful, just honest. "Corporal," he said, "I messed

preparing Marines for the battlefield that we sometimes forget they need leadership for the long stretches in between. They need leaders who can fight, but also leaders who can guide; leaders who demand excellence, but also leaders who understand that excellence grows from dignity, not fear.

The two-dimensional infantry leader never forgets that they command bodies and minds, actions and emotions, discipline and trust. They lead in



Just as in the past, modern Marine infantry leadership requires multiple dimensions from the technical and tactical to the human. (Photo by Cpl Grace Stover.)

up. But I'm trying." I realized then that he was not asking me to be easier. He was asking me to see him.

Leadership is not the correction itself; it is everything surrounding the correction. It is the tone you set, the trust you maintain, and the willingness to look at the Marine behind the mistake. That is the second dimension, and without it, the first one collapses under its own weight.

Infantry leaders shape Marines for a profession where the consequences can be final. That responsibility demands more than technical competence; it demands self-awareness, restraint, moral courage, and the humility to admit when our first instinct was not the right one. We spend so much time

the open and in the gaps. They see the tactical problem and the human being carrying the weight of the solution.

That is the leadership the infantry deserves. That is the leadership I strive for—and that is the leadership the Marine Corps must continue to grow, one quiet moment, one correction, one decision, one Marine at a time.

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