



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

The Five Most Relevant Leader Attributes

Our leadership doctrine (FM 6-22) identifies 18 attributes that “distinguish high performing leaders of character.” These leader attributes are described as inherent characteristics that shape how individuals act and respond to their environments. Our doctrine doesn’t rank order the leader attributes, so the CompanyCommand team set out to discover whether some attributes are more relevant than others to leading platoons and companies. The team utilized an unconventional approach—asking junior officers to reflect upon advice they had already given or

stories they had told and then identify which leader attributes were required in those situations. A clear, surprising pattern emerged. Whether the company-grade officers were giving advice to the next generation of platoon leaders or telling a story about a typical counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan, they most frequently credited the same five leader attributes—judgment, interpersonal tact, confidence, respect and duty. This month, we share some of the advice and stories that reflect the relevance of those leader attributes.

Leader Attributes Revealed in Advice For the Next Generation of Platoon Leaders

From 2008–09, several hundred officers assigned to the Maneuver Captains Career Course [MCCC] voluntarily completed a survey in which they were asked: “If you could pass on one lesson to the next generation of platoon leaders, what would you say? What is the story behind this insight or recommendation?” Their responses were published in a series of MCCC yearbooks, which are available in the CompanyCommand forum. These officers were later invited to uncover the deeper meaning in their own advice by interpreting it using doctrinal terms, including the leader attributes. Each officer also added a title to his or her advice. What follows is some of the advice that applied to *confidence, judgment, interpersonal tact, respect and duty*.

Do the right thing. Don’t get caught up in being better than the guy next to you or worry about who will get rated higher. Teach your brother platoon leaders everything you know. Don’t hold back. You may have to count on them to cover your left or right flank. Even if they resist you at first, continue to be the better person and share your knowledge and experience. No regrets.

Establish a bond within your team. First and foremost, love and care for your Soldiers. Inspire them to believe not only in you but also in themselves. When you deploy to a combat environment, your Soldiers, NCOs and fellow officers become your family. Gain their trust and respect, and there is no limit to how far they will push themselves for you.

Have faith in those you lead. Even though you are their platoon leader and outrank them, you are not special and are not better than your Soldiers. Somebody has to be in charge, and for some reason, you are. In all you do, take your Soldiers’ well-being into consideration. As soon as you truly do this and they know and trust you, your Soldiers will go to the ends of the Earth for you. Never ask one to do something that you yourself are not willing to do. Soldiers are not pawns in a game of chess but rather are somebody’s son, somebody’s brother, somebody’s husband or somebody’s father, just like you. All of you want to come home; your job is to make sure this happens while still accomplishing the mission. Don’t be afraid to stick up for them when you know a mission is tactically flawed. Nobody, including “higher,” wants to see Soldiers hurt or killed, and it’s your job to find a way to reduce the risk to an acceptable level for the possible outcome. Often, higher doesn’t fully think through a mission and will listen to your input. If you can’t find a way to justify the mission, let higher know that you think the risk isn’t worth the end state. When your Soldiers see you stand up for them to somebody that outranks you, you will earn their trust. Don’t be afraid to ask for and accept help from your Soldiers. You are all on the same team; they are out there, just like you, risking their lives.

Leadership priorities. Soldiers respect competence above all. It is not about your rank or being best friends with them. If you are a competent leader with sound judgment, your Soldiers—whether they like you or not—will do



Company-grade officers rank establishing a bond with the team, gaining soldiers' trust and respect, taking their well-being into consideration, and having faith in them as integral attributes of a good leader.

what you ask of them because they know you have weighed the alternatives and chosen the best course of action for the task. Prioritize your Soldiers above evaluations or the perceptions of others, and you will be successful.

Learning and leading. As a new platoon leader, you must find a balance between learning from your subordinates and being a decisive leader. There is never harm in asking a subordinate for input; in fact, this tells them that you acknowledge and respect their experience. Once you have received their input, however, it is up to you to make the decisions and put your name on the plan. Once you show your Soldiers and NCOs that you are genuinely looking out for their best interests and do not view your leadership as dictatorial, you will find you have their eager support. A platoon functions infinitely better as a team rather than as a collection of Soldiers who follow the draconian orders of their superiors. It is our Army's ability to foster this spirit, a direct result of our superb NCO corps, that makes the U.S. Army superior to any other military force in history. Just remember that at the end of the day, you remain responsible for everything your platoon does or fails to do. No matter how good you may feel your team is, never falter in

your discipline and watchfulness.

Trust your instincts. Always trust your instincts. There will be times that you will have a "gut feeling" about something that your platoon sergeant, an NCO or even a fellow officer tells you. If it does not make sense to you, then go with what does. Of course you will need to listen to what others (especially those with experience, like your NCOs) have to say, but understand that the decision ultimately lies with you. If you have the time, talk it out and see what will work best; if you don't, just trust your gut instinct.

Two simple rules for being a platoon leader. 1. Understand that you are the platoon leader, but if you don't take the time to listen to your platoon sergeant, NCOs and junior Soldiers, you won't have a platoon for very long. Listen to their advice and then make

your decision. 2. In the absence of orders, make a decision. In the COIN [counterinsurgency] environment, events often occur far too quickly to draw up contingency plans and run through the entire orders process. Do not be afraid to act of your own volition.

Use your brain, use your imagination, understand. Don't be afraid to use your imagination. Just because the "book" doesn't say that a task can be accomplished a certain way does not mean that it cannot be. Numerous times in OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom] II, I found myself stuck making decisions that were doctrinally unsound but tactically necessary, such as clearing entire neighborhoods with only one squad of Soldiers because an IED [improvised explosive device] had gone off on a patrol and one of the Soldiers in that patrol saw the triggermen run into that neighborhood. Ask questions. You are a 2LT; you don't know everything, and everyone around you knows that. Think and ask questions about everything: property accountability, mission tasks, maintenance. Continually pester your XO [executive officer]. As the senior lieutenant in your company, he or she has a wealth of knowledge and most likely has experienced whatever it is that you are fac-

Finding Meaning in Natural Stories. The stories we tell tend to emerge from our deeply held beliefs and attitudes. A naturally occurring story is like the tip of an iceberg—there is much more substance below the surface. Our everyday, conversational stories usually come out as fragmented anecdotes; we always write less than we'd say, and we always say less than we know. Consequently, much of a natural story's context is left unspoken. The only person who understands the intended meaning of a story is its speaker, and even the speaker

may not be aware of his or her full meaning until given the opportunity to reflect on his or her words. In this study, the CC team collected naturally occurring stories and then asked the storytellers to reflect upon their own stories and to answer questions about their meaning, using doctrinal terms and constructs such as the leader attributes. This process enabled the storytellers to recollect their unspoken contexts and to bring them "above the surface" so the entire profession can see and learn from them.

ing. Every deployment is different. Just because you have NCOs who constantly remind you that they have been there, every rotation and every area is different. You will find entire neighborhoods that are at complete opposite ends of the spectrum from one another. Listen to your NCOs and heed their advice, but do not accept it as gospel. You are the platoon leader, and it is your decision that matters.

Value your NCOs! Lean on and learn from your NCOs. They are the heart and soul of our Army. Don't ever take them or their experience for granted—respect them! As a platoon leader, your platoon sergeant will be your lifeblood; pick his brain and understand that you are the one without experience, so keep an attitude of humility and an open mind.

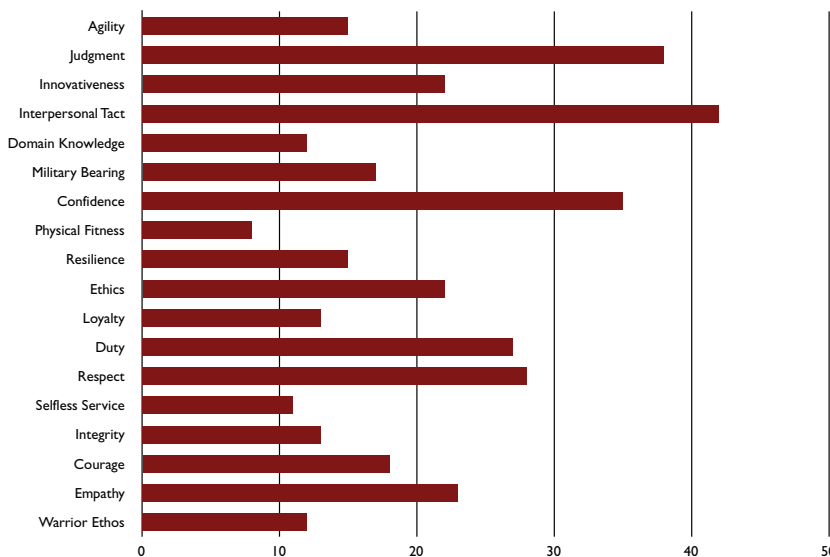
Welcome to leadership, the loneliest time in your life. You have one mouth and two ears, so listen twice as much as you talk. If you do talk, know what you are talking about or you will lose your credibility as a leader. Like credit, credibility is very hard to get and very easy to lose. In order to be an effective platoon leader, you have to think in terms of what is good for the Soldier, the unit and the Army. There are no “cookie cutter” solutions. You have to figure out what motivates particular Soldiers and use it to motivate them. If you schedule training, be there. Sergeant's Time isn't just for sergeants. Make sure it is being done to *your* standards. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. Train your Soldiers hard; they expect it from you. Make sure your Soldiers know the difference between mistakes and bad decisions; retrain mistakes, but don't put up with bad decision-making. If you talk the talk, you'd better be walking the walk. You live in a fishbowl, and your Soldiers are constantly watching you swim.

Leader Attributes Expressed In Counterinsurgency Experiences

In the summer of 2011, we asked 56 company-level officers in Afghanistan to tell the story of an experience that represents what “doing COIN” [counterinsurgency] is like for them. After telling their stories, they each completed a survey that allowed them to interpret and label their stories in doctrinal terms. When the results were tabulated, we

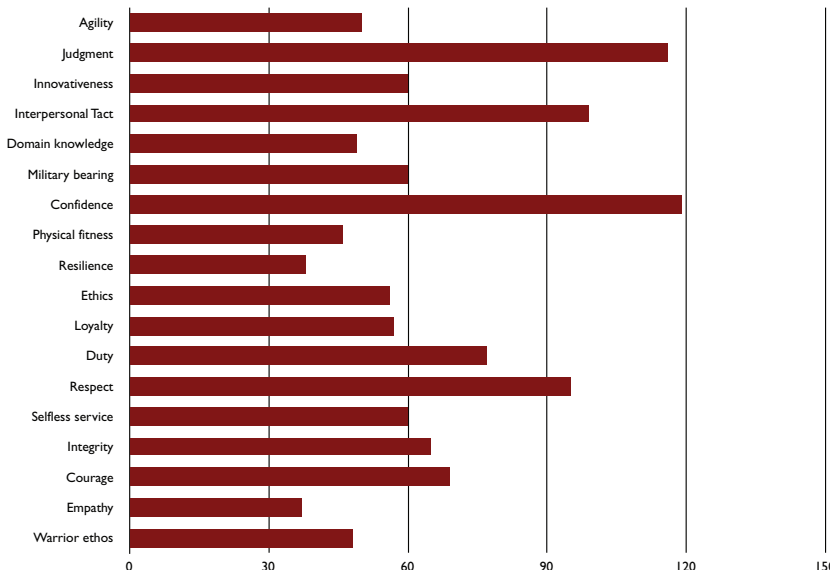
Leader Attributes Among COIN Experiences

56 stories collected



Leader Attributes Essential to Platoon Leaders

174 stories collected



were surprised to discover that these deployed leaders highlighted the same top five leader attributes that the MCCC students had—interpersonal tact, judgment, confidence, respect and duty—although interpersonal tact came to the fore in the COIN environment. One distinct difference was that the leader attribute “empathy,” which was the least relevant attribute in the advice to platoon leaders, was much more relevant to leaders discussing their COIN experiences. What follows is an experience described by a platoon leader in Afghanistan. As he understands it, his story involves all five of the most relevant leader attributes.



Interpersonal tact ranked as the top leader attribute in a survey conducted among company-level officers who had experienced counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Appreciating the experience and outlook of a native elder may not only blunt his criticism but also inspire his cooperation.

Defeating a Faceless Enemy

"We were searching some qalats [walled family compounds] in a village because road workers had been shot at from that location the previous day. I was talking with a local schoolteacher who was providing me information about Taliban activity in the village when an older man approached. He was irate about us searching his qalat and disdainful of the Afghan Police and Coalition Forces, saying that we never knew where to search and that we couldn't keep the people safe. He said the AUP [Afghan uniformed police] are no good, the Americans are no good, and that we basically stink at our jobs. And of course he denied that the Taliban had fired at the road workers from the village, despite all the evidence and intelligence.

"It was hot, and the searches weren't finding anything. And this guy was really getting on my nerves. I was tempted to tell him to go away or I'd detain him for interfering with an investigation, but I could tell that he held influence in the village. Once this elder arrived and started complaining, the schoolteacher's attitude changed. I realized that the elder's bad attitude would spread like a disease if left unchecked, so I took a deep breath and humbly spoke with him. I said that security was a give-and-take and that we needed the people's assistance to protect them from the Taliban.

"He replied that anyone who reported on the Taliban would be killed, so I informed him about the anonymous tip line and asked him to tell others in the village about it. I also mentioned the rewards program that paid cash to locals for providing information on caches or IEDs. As soon as I could, I turned the conversation over to the AUP chief who was present. The man's anger seemed to lessen the longer he spoke with the Afghan police chief. We spent

over an hour talking with him, and by the time we left, he was no longer angry. When we visited the village the following week, that same elder welcomed us and was friendly."

If our stories are indeed windows into our beliefs and attitudes, then we as company-level officers value and rely upon the leader attributes of judgment, interpersonal tact, confidence, respect and duty. Do these findings correspond to your experiences? We invite you to log on to your forum at <http://CC.army.mil> and join the conversation, or to write us at cocmd.team@us.army.mil if you are not a currently commissioned officer. There is great value in sharing our stories, listening to others' stories, reflecting on what we hear and talking about it with fellow professionals.

This article is the fruit of a G-6-sponsored fiscal year 2010 Army

Study Program study on narrative-based research methods. The approach described here is pioneered by David Snowden, a Welsh physicist and knowledge-management thought leader who argues that abductive reasoning is most appropriate to gaining understanding of complex systems. A research report on the complete study, titled "Making Data Meaningful: Leveraging narrative-based research methods," is available in the Defense Technical Information Center (www.dtic.mil). Questions and comments on this article should be directed to peter.kilner@us.army.mil.

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Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?