

Leadership 101

Leadership is not broken—leaders are

by LtCol Joseph Shusko, USMC(Ret)

The Marine Corps has existed for more than 237 years, during which time Marines have defined themselves as the best leaders our Nation has to offer. The Marine Corps leadership's foundation is a set of proven concepts called "core values," "leadership traits," and "principles." These values, traits, and principles have withstood the test of time, as demonstrated by great Americans like John Lejeune, "Chesty" Puller, John Basilone, and countless others. So why is the Marine Corps struggling with moral issues and unethical behavior? Why are Marines required to conduct and be bombarded with what many perceive as senseless annual training by way of PowerPoint presentations and lectures on topics such as ethics, sexual assault, suicide, and alcohol abuse? So another leadership failure has occurred? Our answer: more programs, more PowerPoint presentations, more lectures, more blah, blah, blah, often presented by people who have no real experience with the

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subject and who might even be ethically challenged themselves.

The real answer is to get back to the basics and start conducting ourselves as Marines, just like our forefathers have done for more than 200 years. Our Marine Corps is not broken; we have all the programs we need (and many we do not need). The real answer is what I like to call "Leadership 101." We just need to profess Leadership 101's "proven" concepts and get on with business, as it is and will always remain our hallmark—the bedrock of our Corps—if used properly.

The Marine Corps' heritage is built around ethos, camaraderie, and tradition. This heritage defines us as U.S. Marines and starts at Parris Island, San

Diego, and Quantico when we join the Corps. We are met by our drill instructors to start that great transformation tied to our core values of honor, courage, and commitment. We have strived to "sustain the transformation" through our leadership schools and the underutilized tool of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP). Unfortunately, after we leave those institutions and follow-on programs, we seem to forget what we were taught at this most pivotal formation period. I hear it all the time: "We need to get back to the basics." So why aren't we getting back to the basics? Maybe we should ask, "What *are* the basics?"

We all need to be reminded that the basics are in our core values, leadership traits, and principles, all of which are *action items*; in other words, the basics must be practiced with your Marines. But today's leaders are so busy, tied to their computers answering taskers or sending and receiving email, that they are doing anything and everything but actually being out with their Marines. Imagine if one of those same Marines got up from his desk and went to the other side of the partition and said, "Hey, Marine, let's go PT "or" let's go do MCMAP and discuss something. Anything." What a concept! Sounds like Leadership 101 to me. Unfortunately, many leaders have truly forgotten what it's like to be a leader. So what happens? We have issues with suicide, spousal abuse, sexual assault, financial failure, issues with the law, and on and on, and we try to patch up these issues that require hands-on leadership with



Be there with genuine concern. (Photo by Cpl Kowshon Ye.)

computer programs, PowerPoint presentations, bumper stickers, and other bandages that are simply not working.

So what do we do as an institution? Accountability is the very cornerstone of leadership. Our Corps will eventually fall apart if leaders are not held accountable to their Marines. I recently attended a Combat Operations Specialist Course conference in San Diego, CA, that was full of extremely caring people, all meeting with the goal of helping our military in all the challenges it is facing. The conference attendees did a great job defining the problems. The theme of the conference was about “action,” but the only actionable solutions I heard were to make more programs to combat our challenges and address our problems.

We don't need more bumper stickers or new programs. Instead of redefining a problem we already know we have, or promoting programs that have little chance of sustained success, imagine if the 1,000 well-intentioned doctors, Marines, sailors, soldiers, and others who were at the Combat Operations Specialist Course conference adopted one warrior themselves and personally



We don't need more PowerPoint presentations. Get back to the basics. (Photo by SSgt Ezekiel Kitandwe.)

forgotten the basics. If you are leading in accordance with everything that has been tattooed on your soul as a Marine, then you are probably applauding this article. If you're throwing stones at this article, you might want to evaluate why you came into the Corps in the first

Live in the present. Be the very best Marine in your MOS that you can be. Remember that there is no bad MOS, only bad Marines.

Live for today. Life is not a dress rehearsal.

Live for your Marines—mentor them, nurture them, and show them genuine concern.

The clock is running. Make the best of everything you have. Take responsibility for your life, because you are responsible for the weather over your head and the grid square where you put your boots.

Make a difference for your Marines. At the end of the day, write down how you've made a difference. Don't watch the world go by. You would spend every penny of the \$86,400; spend the 86,400 seconds our Commandant gives you just the same! And if you can look in the mirror and say you did your best, then you deserve to wear the uniform. Think about that!

So where do we start? Here's one concrete suggestion: Leaders, push away from your computers and only spend 1 hour on the computer in the morning and 1 hour on the computer in the evening. The rest of the time, be out with your Marines conducting physical fitness, combat conditioning, martial arts, annual training, or anything to allow yourself to again start hearing the heartbeats of your Marines. It's all about being there for—and with—your Marines.

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showed “genuine concern” for his professional and personal welfare by mentoring him 24/7, 365 days a year? What a great “program” that would be! And what type of program would that be? It's called Leadership 101!

We need leaders to truly get back to the basics of being there for their Marines 24/7, 365 days a year. And when I say “to be there,” I mean to be there with “genuine concern.” What we need are leaders who own up to our leadership legacy. We need to hold our leaders accountable for leading their Marines.

I'm not saying all leaders in the Marine Corps are broken. Many Marines are “leading” by example and, unsurprisingly, are not having a lot of negative issues with their Marines. These leaders are successful because they haven't

place. There is nothing new here. Let me share with you one of my favorite tie-ins, called “86,400 Seconds.”

Imagine there is a bank that credits your account \$86,400 every day. It carries no balance and every evening deletes what you don't use. What would you do with that money? Most of us would spend the money or give it away, but none of us would likely give it back to the bank.

Well, each of us has that bank account, and the currency is called “time.” This time is what the Commandant gives us every day that we are Marines. Every morning he credits you with 86,400 seconds, and every evening he writes off what you don't use. Your account has no balance. Each day you have a new account. If you fail to use those deposits, you can't go back.

I worked for a “leader” for 3 years who never once went to visit the inside of the building where I worked, and never gave me any guidance in response to my duties and responsibilities. We’re talking about a span of 3 years! Something is wrong with that type of leadership. I have also had leaders who never took the time to sit down with me regarding my fitness reports and performance. Does that sound familiar to you? I blame such behavior partially on computers and how busy those machines have made us!

Leaders need to get back to the basics by focusing on the professional and personal lives of their Marines. Here are a few questions you might ask yourself in order to get to know your Marines better:

- Do you know the birthdays and anniversaries of all your Marines?
- Do you know the personal issues your Marines are challenged with on a daily basis?
- Do you know your Marines’ career goals and life ambitions?

- Have you sat with your Marines to help map out a route to achieve those goals and ambitions?

The basics! Simply getting answers to the above questions will start you down the road to creating that bond with your Marines that is the hallmark of great leadership.

Leaders have to set the example in everything they do. When is the last time you conducted MCMAP *with* your Marines? When is the last time you conducted a values tie-in story *with* your Marines? Leaders have to live a balanced life so they can be there for their Marines in all endeavors. A simple manual like *Leading Marines* captures the essence of being a Marine.¹ When was the last time you picked up that great document and read it cover to cover? When was the last time you practiced what it says? There are many other great documents out there written by our forefathers on leadership. Read them and then go out and *practice those basics again*. Don’t do

it for yourself—do it for the parents who entrusted the lives of their sons and daughters to you.

Many Marines are sick and tired of all the new programs, but they are our own fault. Take note, Marines: As the quality of leadership decreases, the number of programs increases. Leadership 101 is not based on programs or computers, and there are no clear answers to every condition or challenge a leader faces. Each of those challenges should be tackled with imagination, understanding, skillful action, and genuine concern. If a leader takes what he is taught from day one, utilizing the tools he already has, I believe he will be successful more times than not.

Marines deserve to have the best leaders leading them. We have all been given the proven tools from our forefathers. We don’t need more programs. We don’t need to have any more worthless annual training where all we do is hit the “enter” button on the computer until we get to the end of the presentation for the “certificate.” All we need are good leaders who live their lives—every 86,400 seconds of every day—for their Marines. It’s all about Leadership 101! With good leadership, all issues won’t go away, but many will. Once you understand and apply the fundamentals, you will influence your Marines to behave in a manner that produces the best results. It has been my experience that when a Marine makes himself the epitome of our fine leadership traits and principles, the Marines he leads tend to respond in a favorable way. That favorable response will in turn reduce the number of challenges we face today, and hopefully some of those unnecessary, time-consuming, and distracting programs and requirements.

Note

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6–11, Leading Marines*, Washington, DC, 27 November 2002.



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