

Marine Corps is Not Immune

IN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS THERE has been an upsurge in personnel problems in the Marine Corps. Officer retention, an increasing disciplinary rate and most recently, racial disturbances, head the list of those of primary concern. There are, of course, changing sociological factors involved with which the Marine Corps—and civilian society—has never before had to contend. As one officer recently stated during an interview concerning racial unrest at a major Marine Corps base, "The Marine Corps is not immune to the problems of society." Correct! The Marine Corps, however, does have a considerable advantage over society as a whole in the degree of control and influence it is capable of exercising over its membership. Pride in our organization, self-imposed discipline through training and other such "built-in" controls commence at the recruiting process and continue to varying degrees throughout of Marine's tour of duty. For years, positive leadership has been synonymous with Marine officers and NCOs. Finally, we have the ability to communicate with every Marine. It is this last advantage which can contribute most to the solution of a majority of our problems.

By general definition, communicating consists of relaying information. In dealing with sociological problems, however, a broader dimension is added. Personal feelings and interest must also be communicated. It is in this area that the communicative process most often breaks down.

There are, in the Marine Corps, built-in means for commanders to communicate with their subordinates. "The word" can be passed down the chain of command; a bulletin can be published; a letter can be written; the base newspaper can carry a message. For years, these means have been reasonably effective. If the Commanding General published a bulletin saying it was a good idea for all hands to buy savings bonds, all hands bought bonds. The General represented the ultimate in authority and wisdom, and this was unchallenged. Today, however, it is challenged. Any PFC can turn on a television set and watch the President of the United States booed and hissed. The actions of government leaders, educators, law enforcement agencies and even churches are being increasingly questioned. If fallibility is found, no time is lost in proclaiming and often

amplifying this information to the public. Military officers of all grades are not exempt from this modern-day challenge to authority. As a result, some of our former means of communication have become less effective at a time when there is an urgent need for them to become more effective.

What is needed is more application of command personality to our internal communication. There is little question but that a demonstrated, personal and sincere interest in and appreciation of the people who work for him is one of the most effective morale control tools available to any person in a position of authority.

Let's relate this to our officer retention problem.

In his article, "Something of Value" (GAZETTE: April 1969), Col Archie Clapp perceptively identified one of the prime causes of officer retention problems. He indicated that young officers often feel that their ideas and sometimes

their efforts go unnoticed by their superiors, particularly at higher levels. As an example, he cited the case of junior officers on high level staffs whose originality is frequently removed by the editing pens of word-conscious superiors. Thus, the finished product which reaches the "boss" bears little pride of authorship for the officer who came up with the idea in the first place. Col Clapp suggests as a remedy a more direct contact between the action officer and the approving officer.

A highly personalized variation of this idea would be the periodic hosting of small, informal conferences by a commander or principal staff officer at any level. Properly conducted, these could be an effective means of giving junior officers a real sense of being "in"—of having personal touch with "the boss."

To be most effective and productive, good guidelines for such conferences should be something like the following:

1. Small group—preferably no more than six or eight.
2. Attendees of the same grade if possible (would assist in removing inhibitions of juniority in the group).
3. Random, centralized selection of attendees as opposed to unit nominations.

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RICHARD M. NIXON
SEPTEMBER 1, 1969

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4. Attendance limited to the principal and attendees.
5. Informal atmosphere—coffee available, smoking permitted.
6. No agenda—just an exchange of ideas.
7. Adequate time for relaxed conversation.

Given an "off the record" atmosphere where their ideas on any professional subject were welcomed and received without overt judgment by the principal, a conference such as this would go a long way in convincing the attendees that their ideas really were important, and were being received at a level where they might not inadvertently get lost in the shuffle.

In addition to the morale/retention boosting effect of such get-togethers, two other significant side effects would accrue. First, by discussing some of his problems with them, the principal would likely gain a great deal of their understanding and support in implementing measures to influence or control those problems. True, he could issue an order and the officers would carry it out to the letter—although their hearts might not be in it. Imagine the difference, though, if the young officers got an explanation of the problem straight from the "old man" together with a man-to-man request for some assistance in managing it. There would undoubtedly be a difference in the degree of enthusiasm with which they would carry out the order. Being better able to identify with the troops under them, their enthusiasm would most likely be communicated.

The second side effect is simple. The "old man" might just pick up an idea of how to build a better mousetrap!

A similar means of communicating interest to officers and enlisted men alike would be the placing of more emphasis on meaningful command visits. Such visits should be conducted in as informal and unhurried an atmosphere as possible. Only the most skeletal itinerary should be planned. Thus, if the visit is impromptu and the problem hasn't been run five times before so it would come off perfectly, or if the group chief or section head hasn't passed the word the day before to clean off your desk, get rid of the stuff stacked on top of the safe and half-mast all venetian blinds, then the visit breeds a feeling of respect for the boss's genuine interest in how things are going. All too often, unfortunately, as the visitor's staff car pulls away, the junior officers and troops break their final salute wondering if the "old man" was really taken in by the production they just put on for him. In plain terms, there's been a communication failure.

There was a time in the past when a high ranking officer could visit a base,

review the troops, cut the ribbon opening the new PX and depart, leaving behind improved morale and a feeling of security. "Higher authority" had visited, noted the problems and passed out words of high praise to all. He had, in that day, communicated, and the troops were satisfied. Today's Marine—better educated and more social revolution minded—requires a better selling job. As mentioned earlier, he's learned that authority can be questioned and can sometimes be found wanting. He's got to be shown more than just an image, and any commander's best method of doing this is to put himself in a closer and more realistic relationship to the young Marine.

Hand-in-glove with command visits is the increased necessity for simply talking to subordinates. As previously mentioned, a commander has certain built-

in devices which he can use to "talk" to his command—bulletins, letters, etc. These might once have sufficed, but today much more "eyeball to eyeball" contact is needed. Commanders and principal staff officers at every echelon must use every opportunity to talk to assembled groups.

Since the Vietnam war began, the Marine Corps has poured thousands of dollars and man-hours into a public speaking program to promote understanding and support of the war. Our highest ranking officers travel extensively to speak to the American Legion, the VFW, the Navy League, the DAR, Rotary Clubs, or any organization of stature which asks them to come. This has been of tremendous public service. Is it not equally important that we turn at least the same degree of personal communication and interest "in house"?

It's extremely important that we have an informed public, of course, but as Marine officers our primary effort must be directed toward the men for whom we are responsible. With this in mind, it would be well to closely examine our public speaking program with a view toward preventing internal problems rather than directing our efforts toward external ones.

The personnel problems facing the Marine Corps today are not news to any of us. We've seen proposals for their solution ranging from pay raises to readoption of the Sam Browne belt. Some of these may work, while others may not. One sure-fire solution, though nothing new nor revolutionary, is increased emphasis on command communication—a fundamental of leadership we can't afford to ignore. US&MC

OPINION

By Maj R. C. Reynolds

Eliminate Longevity for PLC

PROVIDING SCHOLARSHIPS AND SUBSIDIES for the members of the PLC program should be given serious consideration, particularly by the G-1 Division and the Personnel Department at Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps.

I, however, advocate a more radical change to the existing officer selection procedure for the PLC program. Simply stated, the following action would be taken:

1. Eliminate longevity credit for pay purposes while a man is enrolled in the PLC program. His pay entry base date would be the same date of initial commissioning in the Marine Corps.

2. Pay a monthly subsidy, during the academic years prior to being commissioned, to each PLC who successfully completes the PLC Junior Course.

Let me elaborate on the above points. As far as I know, the PLC Program is the only officer candidate program of all of the military services that gives longevity credit to start on the day a candidate enrolls in the program. This benefit is never fully understood by the college student at the time he joins the PLC program (even though the Officer Selection Officer discusses it in great detail with him). Later, however, usually when this young man is a 1st lieutenant, the extra pay is greatly appreciated and he is grateful that he had the good fortune to enroll in such a program. It is also a very controversial topic of discussion with his contemporaries who have graduated from the Naval Reserve Officers Training Course (NROTC)

program of the Naval Academy. The latter graduates do not get longevity for the time spent in their respective programs during college, however, they did receive a subsidy in the form of an education and a small monthly income. Let's face it, today's college student is immediately concerned about how he is to get through school and financial matters are foremost in his mind. So instead of paying a differential after he is commissioned, I would take the total amount of the money differential and pay it to the candidate in the form of a subsidy over his entire time in college. The student would have to maintain satisfactory status in the PLC program and also in college, else his subsidy would be cancelled. Institution of this program would not cost the Marine Corps any additional funds. More important, by offering such a subsidy to prospective candidates, Officer Selection Officers will be able to be much more selective in the type of candidate they enroll. Additionally, all commissioned officers (less those with previous enlisted service) will receive longevity based essentially on their date of being initially commissioned in the Corps.

The subsidy system for PLCs places the program in the same perspective as the officer sources such as the NROTC program and the service academies as far as pay is concerned. Establishment of this subsidy then produces a two-fold benefit:

1. It provides a powerful tool to assist the Officer Selection Officer to choose

and enroll only the most promising officer candidates.

2. It removes the inequities in base pay differentials between the PLC trained officer and his contemporary from the NROTC program or service academies. US&MC

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code)

1. Date of filing: 1 October, 1969.
2. Title of publication: MARINE CORPS GAZETTE.
3. Frequency of issue: Monthly.
4. Location of known office of publication: 3110 Elm Ave., Baltimore, Md. 21211.
5. Location of the headquarters or general business offices of the publishers: P.O. Box 1775, MCB, Quantico, Virginia 22134.
6. Names and addresses of publishers, editor, and managing editor:
Publisher: LtCol P. R. Hines.
Managing Editor: Joseph D. Dodd.

7. Owner (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock; If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual must be given.): Marine Corps Association, P.O. Box 1913, MCB, Quantico, Virginia 22134.

8. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None.

9. For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at special rates (Section 132-122, Postal Manual)

The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes have not changed during preceding 12 months.

10. Extent and nature of circulation:

A. Total no. copies printed (net press run)	25,000*	25,000**
B. Paid circulation		
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2. Mail subscriptions	23,338*	22,789**
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E. Total distribution (sum of C and D)	24,433*	23,815**
F. Office use, left-over, unaccounted, spoiled after printing	567*	1,185**
G. Total (sum of E & F should equal net press run shown in A)	25,000*	25,000**

*Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months.

**Single issue nearest to filing date.

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