

The Commandant's Perspective

The Marine Commander

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

'Command means doing the whole mission well . . .'



Command is at the center of what we do as a Corps: making Marines and winning the Nation's battles. Because every Marine and every Sailor serving the Corps is either serving as a commander—from fire team leader to force commander—or supporting those commanders, all hands must understand the core elements of command responsibility.

A commander is a steward of precious resources. In both war and peace, commanders are invested with the trust and confidence of their Nation, their Marine Corps, and the individual Marines and Sailors in their care. Commanders honor these sacred trusts by projecting the unit they lead into the future, by ensuring that tomorrow's mission is an important consideration in accomplishing today's tasks. Understanding stewardship is vital because every commander, no matter how capable or how enthusiastic, will one day pass the torch to another. Whether abruptly on the battlefield or in a well-ordered turnover in garrison, the passage will come. It is a paradox, and a hard reality, that much of what the commander does to execute his responsibilities today will not be measured until well after he or she is gone.

With this in mind, let me review some of the critical lessons that have been passed on to me and which I have learned about being a commander.

Of all the responsibilities of the commander, the most important and the most demanding is preparing for war. Preparing for war demands that we take care of our people and equipment. More than just training, preparing for war demands that each Marine and each Sailor is fully prepared physically, mentally, and morally for the challenge of combat. Of course it means that the unit trains as it will fight, with minimal artificiality or limitations, but safely and professionally. Of course it means that a team member not properly cared for or a piece of equipment not properly maintained is a combat loss. Of course it means understanding that the Marine Corps is a ready force, not a force that will have time to get ready. The commander's peacetime challenge is to achieve that careful balance between training too hard and not training enough, between realism and safety, while always preparing the unit for war. We exist as a Corps of Marines to fight and win. All training and preparation—everything we do—must support that purpose.

Commanders must be personally ready—ready emotionally, physically, and morally—for the rigors of the maneuver battlefield. They must ensure that subordinates are ready, both for the jobs they *currently* hold and for assuming the duties of the *next senior* level. The unit must be ready to function as a team, with as much cross-training as possible to ensure that it can continue to perform its mission as it sustains losses. The commander must stress teamwork at every opportunity.

Just as being a Marine involves more than being personally competent, being an effective commander of Marines requires much more than the specific personal actions that affect the individual members of the command. The commander is responsible for creating and maintaining a climate in which excellence and professionalism can flourish. This means being committed to an education and training process that is continuous. It means understanding that an atmosphere that makes all hands anxious to learn and perfect their skills is healthy, indeed crucial. Given a clear message that everyone counts, that their leaders care, and that the worst question is the one not asked, Marines and Sailors will flourish. They will excel. In short, the commander must build and sustain a learning organization.

The bedrock of such an organization is ownership—all members of the unit believing that they are, individually, valued and respected members of the team. The commander is accountable first and foremost, but every member of the unit must understand and share in that sense of accountability. This can only be achieved in a leadership climate that supports the personal dignity of each Marine and Sailor, one in which respect flows freely in both directions, one in which fair and equitable treatment of all hands is the unquestioned standard. While this may seem apparent to any leader, the attentive commander soon learns that ownership requires a constant effort and can never be taken for granted. Racism, sexism, situational ethics in any form can and will destroy

this climate of respect and dignity instantly. There can be no true learning, excellence, or professionalism when these destructive kinds of behavior are tolerated.

In creating a climate of personal dignity and continuous learning, commanders must demonstrate great strength of character and a sense of ethics and integrity. This is the foundation upon which successful military units are always built. No amount of physical fitness, professional knowledge, or decisiveness can make up for a lack of integrity. Our Marines and Sailors are intelligent and are taught from boot camp to act with boldness and individual initiative. On chaotic, lethal battlefields both now and in the future, they have vast destructive power in their hands. They have also proven their ability to act independently and compassionately, to judge situations for themselves, and to show the highest caliber of moral leadership. This is why they must be led by commanders of the strongest character and integrity, and why there is no place for situational ethics or wavering morality in our Corps.

Ultimately, every member of the unit must be integrated into a team that is prepared to execute effective military decisions faster than our adversaries, in any scenario, on any scale. Achieving this precision requires that the whole "culture" of the unit stress the importance of tempo, initiative at the lower echelons, simple plans, and clear orders. Commanders themselves need to have a deeply rooted instinct for action and must instill this instinct in their subordinates. It is important, therefore, for commanders to foster an environment that allows their subordinates to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. As Marines and Sailors learn from errors and move on to accomplish their mission, we must tolerate less than complete perfection. Nothing fosters boldness or the quest for professionalism more quickly than an atmosphere free from the vestiges of a "zero defects" mentality. We must be allowed to err in peacetime to ensure we do not err in combat. We will not be able to survive if we do otherwise.

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It takes the entire unit to win a battle, but a commander alone can lose one. More often than not, battles are won or lost more in the minds of the commander than in the actual arrangement of combat power on the battlefield. Our maneuver warfare doctrine recognizes this and is centered around attacking our opponent's decisionmaking system and internal cohesion—the ability to react and function under stress; the will to persevere; in short, the personal judgment and influence of a commander—those things that cannot be pulled from a regulation or a field manual. In war these are decisive to the outcome of combat and must frame the commander's approach to training and education of his or her subordinates in peacetime.

The commander must also address the importance of the family to the individual Marine and Sailor and that individual's unit. As I mentioned earlier, preparing for war is more than good training, more than equipment that works. It is also a clear and focused mind, unencumbered by worries about the welfare of loved ones. Our profession is a demanding one and it is no less so for our families. The demands we place on a young Marine or Sailor, a new spouse, or the children of a family can be overwhelming. Commanders must take an active role in the preparation and support of the family by maximizing tools such as the Key Volunteer Program and other resources. By helping our Marines and Sailors to have a strong family—educated and supported by the total Marine Corps family—we enable them to focus their attention on their profession and being ready. When we do this well, we help fulfill the wish of every commander and every family to return their Marines and Sailors home alive. Ultimately, this is how we take care of our own.

The compass of a commander must be always pointing toward the preparation of the unit for war. All hands, regardless of the unit location or mission, must have an instinct for maintaining readiness for combat and decisive action. The commander must continually foster a leadership climate that will stand up to the test of combat. This means insisting on proficiency and professional dedication at every echelon—doing the *whole* mission well and measuring success against wartime standards. This means establishing a rock solid foundation of integrity and ethical behavior, upholding the personal dignity of all hands, and freeing them from "zero defects" thinking. This means taking care of the troops and their families. Nothing less will fulfill the special trust bestowed upon the commander by our Nation and the Marine Corps. Marines in command do these things. Marines and Sailors, the men and women, under their command expect and deserve these things. Our Corps will flourish according to how well we, as commanders, do these things.

