



### **Responsibility, Accountability and the Zero-Defects Mentality**

Failure is something unacceptable to Marines. It's in our heritage; it's in our blood.... We don't fail. Everyone knows: *Marines* don't fail. That said, are you able to distinguish the difference between the times when there is no room for error and those times when allowing subordinates to learn from mistakes is the right thing to do? Can you avoid the "Zero-Defects Mentality"?

Perhaps we should examine what these three things are: responsibility, accountability and the zero-defects mentality, and what they mean to you and to our Corps.

Responsibility is at the very heart of being a Marine. It is about trust. It is about being "trustworthy." It is about making decisions, about deciding to do what is right. You know about responsibility. After all, you are the one who joined the Marines.

You're the one who stood tall, raised your hand and pledged to defend the Constitution of the United States of America...a very responsible act.

When you became a Marine, you were expected to take responsibility for yourself. In our Corps, however, it isn't long before you are expected to assume responsibility for others. You are now, or soon will be, expected to lead. At the same time you are entrusted to lead, you are also given the authority to get the job done. You are free to share authority within the ranks you have been entrusted to lead. This is called delegation. Sergeants delegate some of their authority to corporals and so on. And while the delegation of authority is a proven technique for mission success, attempts to delegate *responsibility* always end in failure. Responsibility can never be delegated. Responsibility, remember, is your deci-

sion to do what needs to be done, to do what is right.

So what of accountability? Accountability means that you must give account for your actions. It differs from responsibility in that it is not a decision, or an action, but a sum of what you have done. It is an end product. Is your rifle clean or not? You have been entrusted with the responsibility of the weapon, but on inspection day you will be held accountable for its condition. As you can see, accountability is the proof of whether you have been responsible. As Marines, we will be held accountable for our actions. Accountability is what the nation expects of the Corps. It is what I expect of you. Responsibility and accountability go hand in hand. The fusing of responsibility and accountability is what makes Marines effective leaders and followers.

The zero-defects mentality, however, is at odds with both effective leadership and effective followership. It is generated by a misunderstanding of the fundamentals of accountability. It is sometimes, in itself, irresponsible.

There are times when there is absolutely no room for error. In those instances, detailed guidance followed by thorough supervision is required to ensure the desired results are achieved. Unfortunately, some leaders cannot distinguish between when these measures are required and when they are not. They become micro-managers and are intolerant of mistakes. They expect decisions made by subordinate leaders to mirror, in detail, those which they would have made. In so doing, they create an environment where subordinates do not grow and leadership development is suppressed. No one dares act beyond what is expressly directed for fear of making a mistake.

Mistakes are acts of *commission*. That is, you did something you thought was right, but it turns out that you made the wrong choice. It was a mistake. But even from a mistake, there are lessons to be learned. Good leaders create an environment where subordinates are allowed to make mistakes, yet are not put into situations for which they are unprepared or in which the scope of the mistake could be dangerous. In training, for instance, a subordinate may pick the least desirable target for an artillery mission. This mistake can lead to valuable discussion and be the source of a permanently learned lesson. On the other hand, a mistake that would result in the rounds falling outside the impact area cannot be allowed.

In contrast, acts of *omission* are rarely categorized as mistakes but rather as irresponsible behavior. You knew what needed to be done, but either chose to do otherwise or just let events take their course without ever really deciding on a course of action. The

leader with a zero-defects mentality often breeds this kind of irresponsible behavior. If mistakes are simply not tolerated, then subordinates tend to become persons of omission. They do nothing because omission is perceived as less risky than doing something...something which may entail failure.

Frequently those who cannot tolerate mistakes are guilty of irresponsible behavior themselves. They have been given responsibility for the training and leadership development of their subordinate Marines. But how can they encourage imaginative training or promote safe risktaking, if their junior leaders retreat from new ideas for fear of making a mistake? If it is safer to repeat a proven course of action or to do nothing, why try something new? How do you develop a leader...a decision maker, if you never let them make decisions? These are the dilemmas to which a zero-defects mentality leads. This mentality is bad for the Marine Corps. It stifles growth and holds us back.

Do not confuse losing the zero-defects mentality with losing accountability. Remember, accountability is based on whether you made responsible decisions. You should expect to be held accountable for irresponsible decisions and the actions that result from them.

When I became Commandant, I published the Commandant's Planning Guidance. In it, I stated, "I want to be absolutely clear that, outside the areas of morality and ethics, Marines can make mistakes as long as they learn from those mistakes and move on to accomplish their mission. In areas not involving character, we must continue to work to remove the last 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."

Responsibility is fundamental to being a Marine. Accountability is critical to our Corps. But, a zero-defects mentality is a combat readiness issue. It discourages individual initiative, and it has no place in the nation's foremost organization of leaders...the United States Marine Corps.



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