

Marine Noncommissioned Officers: On the Front Lines of Leadership

By Gen Charles C. Krulak, USMC, Commandant of the Marine Corps

As I near the conclusion of my third year as your Commandant, I am awestruck by the quality and character of the young Marines throughout our Corps. In particular, I could not be more proud of our noncommissioned officers whose professionalism and selfless devotion to duty truly make them a vital part of America's Corps of Marines. From the recruiting process, through recruit training, and into the operating forces, we hold our NCOs responsible for the care and development of our nation's most precious resource—the individual Marine. No other service in this nation, nor in any other, fully entrusts its NCOs to the extent that we do. Since 1775, this “special trust and confidence” in the character and ability of the Marine noncommissioned officer has been the cornerstone of our success in both making Marines and winning battles.

When Marines sew that second stripe on their sleeves, their focus changes from that of one's self to that of their small unit. The NCOs' duty is to transition their commander's intent into action so as to accomplish the unit's mission. In so doing, Marine NCOs incur obligations to their unit, to the individual Marines who comprise that unit, to their seniors and to themselves.

NCOs' Obligations to the Unit. The NCOs' primary obligations to their unit are to win on the battlefield, accomplish all assigned tasks and to build and foster unit cohesion. In so doing, they must create trust among Marines from vastly different social backgrounds and cultural experiences. The NCOs build such trust through demanding training, by setting meaningful standards and holding their Marines accountable to those standards, and by requiring Marines to work together as a team to accomplish the mission. They build this trust by eliminating the ignorance of prejudice while, at the same time, educating Marines on the value of diversity. This mutual trust is all too easily destroyed when the NCO tolerates...even momentarily...racist overtures, sexual harassment, fraternization or hazing. NCOs who encourage or turn their heads to any of these evils will immediately lose credibility...and unit cohesion will be destroyed.

Our noncommissioned officers understand that the title “Marine” is the common thread that binds us together. They realize that the entire Corps is an “elite” force and that completing recruit training is the only “initiation” required. They know that a unit can ill afford to foster cliques or demonstrate favoritism based on race, religion or gender without ruining unit cohesion and thus destroying combat effectiveness. Instead, they assign duties, awards and billets on the basis of proficiency, character and potential and without regard to some other unjust bias. They not only employ this philosophy when interacting with juniors, but they set the example by consistently using it with respect to their peers.



NCOs' Obligations to Their Subordinates. The Marine NCO must consistently balance discipline with compassion. NCOs understand that the authority and power entrusted to them must be wielded with responsibility and that they must never use it to take advantage of subordinates. Every order or instruction they issue and every act they perform must take into consideration what will make their team more effective and combat capable. Every effort must be made to ensure mission accomplishment and Marine welfare.

NCOs are obligated to provide for the professional development of each of their charges. This development best occurs through challenging, creative and well-rounded training. While the development of the overall training syllabus is the responsibility of the larger unit, the NCO must actively seek out ways to improve upon it and to expand it. German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's assertion that “the best form of ‘welfare’ for the troops is first class training” remains as true today as it has been throughout the history of warfare. Demanding and challenging training immediately demonstrates to Marines the need for mutual trust in order to fight, survive and win in combat situations. Creative, innovative training also stimulates the young Marines' interest and cultivates his or her enthusiasm, thereby helping them to maintain a positive attitude and a thirst for learning. Since NCOs know that there is more to being a good Marine than simply performing well in military occupational specialty (MOS) skills, they ensure that proper emphasis is placed on common Marine Battle Skills and General Subjects Training. While they refrain from unrealistically expecting every Marine to score 300 on the physical fitness test, qualify high expert on the rifle range and become “Water Safety Qualified,” they demand that Marines give their very best in attempting to reach realistic, individual goals and that every Marine be strictly held to Marine Corps standards. They reward and discipline wisely and fairly with the goal of generating *self-discipline* within each of their Marines.

NCOs are obligated to pass on the “gift” of tactical and technical expertise within their MOS, just as it was passed on to them...and better. Marine NCOs remember the leadership examples and training techniques that their seniors used during their own development...both good and bad. They avoid the temptation to repeat mistakes which may have been made during their own development simply because “that's the way it was done when I was a lance corporal.” The conscientious NCOs train and prepare their subordinates to assume the next higher leadership position. They do this through example and by using General John A. Lejeune's timeless leadership philosophy of teacher-scholar, parent-child. This approach will not only build team depth, it will also provide continuity and redundancy on the field of battle. However, NCOs must be

careful not to use this approach as an excuse for not doing their share of the work.

Marine NCOs are obligated to identify and strengthen their juniors' weaknesses by working with them toward improvement. This obligation is not confined merely to Marine specific skill deficiencies. Rather, it extends to areas such as marital, financial and substance abuse problems as well. Good NCOs know when the problem is beyond their own professional abilities to correct and are intelligent enough to seek help for the subordinate from the chain of command, the unit substance abuse control officer, the chaplain or the Family Service Center as appropriate. In short, being a capable NCO requires demonstrating care and compassion for the Marine and his or her family as fellow human beings and not simply as "tools" with which to get the job done. Marines are smart! They see right through insincerity.

Solid NCOs consistently set a positive example for their subordinates to emulate by being selfless in their approach to duty. They must set the example by their own unquenchable thirst to learn and grow as Marines and by their enthusiasm and positive attitude in the face of discomfort and adversity. They accept responsibility for the failures or shortcomings of their unit without attempting to deflect blame onto their subordinates. They keep their juniors informed as completely and in as timely a fashion as possible, for they remember what it was like to be unprepared for the next training event and to spend hours waiting for "the word." Simultaneously, Marine NCOs build on their subordinates' individual strengths by requiring them to help instruct and train their fellow Marines in those areas where they have demonstrated talent and expertise. This enhances their leadership development and increases their sense of pride and accomplishment.

NCOs' Obligations to Seniors. "MCDP 1 Warfighting" tells us that "until a commander has reached and stated a decision, each subordinate should consider it his duty to provide his honest, professional opinion—even though it may be in disagreement with his senior's." NCOs do their senior enlisted and officers a grave disservice when they elect to act as "yes men." Today's battlefield (not to mention tomorrow's) is far too complex to afford victory to a unit whose NCOs are afraid to bring potential problems to the attention of their seniors. At times, this will not be easy. It requires NCOs to use the moral courage that goes hand in hand with the "special trust and confidence" mentioned in their promotion warrant.

While raising reservations and making recommendations, it is incumbent upon the skillful NCO to do so with tact and respect, and in such a manner as not to challenge the senior's authority or jeopardize his or her credibility with the unit. Doing anything less degrades NCOs in their subordinates' eyes no less than it degrades the senior. Once a legal and moral decision has been made, NCOs are obligated to their senior to discharge the directive as if it were their own. They must avoid the temptation of passing the order to their subordinates as a decision they fought against and with which they do not agree.

NCOs are also obligated to keep their seniors informed. Just as with juniors, this fosters trust. Similarly, it builds the senior's confidence in the NCO's professionalism and ability. Wise NCOs periodically update their senior on the status of their Marines' training, welfare and equipment...without the senior having to ask.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the NCO is obligated to his senior to bring his experience and innovative ideas to bear on the decision-making process. Designing challenging training opportunities, for example, is tough; and it gets still tougher at each successive level as you go up the chain of command. The NCOs' well-thought-out recommendations, therefore, are invaluable.

NCOs' Obligations to Self. As strange as it sounds, Marine noncommissioned officers owe it to themselves to enjoy the "burden" of their leadership position. If they do not, it will be obvious to their unit, and they will not be effective. Just as "enthusiasm is contagious," so is the lack thereof. Only the NCO is in a position to give the close, constant, personal type of leadership that I have mentioned above. When NCOs provide their unit with this type of leadership, then they will reap the greatest return...the accomplishment of the mission and the willing obedience, confidence, loyalty and respect of the United States Marines entrusted to their care. I cannot imagine a greater, more satisfying reward!

Marine NCOs owe it to themselves to refrain from micro managing. By failing to supervise, their subordinates will not, and cannot, develop proficiency in their own billets because they will not know what needs improvement.

Conversely, by micro managing, NCOs will find themselves working harder and longer as they struggle to keep up with their subordinates' duties as well as their own. In either case, NCOs do themselves a great disservice.

Finally, NCOs owe it to themselves to listen to their Marines. At first glance, one may think that I have mistakenly listed this as an obligation to self when it should be included as an obligation to subordinates. If you think about it more carefully, however, you will realize that, in most cases, several heads are better than one. No one should realize more than NCOs that they promote enthusiasm in accomplishing the mission, if their juniors know that their thoughts, ideas and innovations are valued. Similarly, no Marine has a monopoly on great ideas, and the wise NCO will find many of them residing in the "brain housing groups" of his or her subordinates.

The summation of all these obligations to unit, seniors, subordinates and self can be given in one word...duty. Tomorrow's battlefield will become more dispersed as technological advances continue to be made in communications and weaponry. The need for intelligent, selfless and professional noncommissioned officers focused on "doing their duty" with little or no supervision, will only become greater. There is no more demanding mental, emotional and often physical task than that of leading United States Marines. The only thing that is greater than this "burden" is the intense personal reward of knowing that you have made a difference...that you have been selfless in your leadership. For a good noncommissioned officer of Marines, that is more than enough.

Semper Fidelis,



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