

IDEAS & ISSUES (LEADERSHIP)

Establishing Credibility

Be competent and have character

by MGSgt Charles A. Walker

Be competent and have character; these are the two components to credibility. Marines desire credibility not because they want recognition but because they want the evidence of their success in the past to influence their success in the future. As a Marine, there are many things that you cannot control: your duty station, billets and tasks assigned, and the people you have to work with (or work for). There is one thing you can control though, and that is your own credibility. First, let me acknowledge that the further we progress in rank, our success has less and less to do with ourselves and more to do with the Marines whom we serve alongside. The point here is that individual credibility is established by displaying competence and character.

Whether in recruit training or Officer Candidates School, we each learned the leadership principle “be technically and tactically proficient.” The core of that principle is to be competent. Regardless of rank or MOS, we are expected to be the subject matter experts at the appropriate level. We are expected to master the technical skills of our trade and to tactically apply them in a given condition or environment. As Marines, we are taught that to be competent we must know our job “two levels up.” Developing that level of competency is hard work. Rarely does the Marine Corps as an institution deliberately set conditions for the individual Marine to achieve that level of competency. A Marine must show initiative and aggressively pursue the attainment of that level. There are few forcing functions that require a Marine to attend advanced training or courses

>MGSgt Walker is an 0369 (infantry unit leader) currently serving as the Operations Chief, 4th Marine Regiment.

for his MOS. Either the Marine's command makes his development a priority or the individual Marine is persistent in pursuing attendance at an advanced or supplementary course.

Operational tempo and competing priorities don't always permit an individual to break away from the unit and go to school. In these instances, the Marine must “make up in hustle

what he lacks in experience.” By asking questions, seeking mentorship, eagerly assuming increased responsibilities, and displaying faithfulness in the sustenance of proficiency, a Marine can build competence. This takes time, it takes persistence, and it takes consistency. The old adage “Rome wasn't built in a day” can likewise be said of competency. Marines can develop competency through training and involved leadership who guide them toward meeting (and exceeding) the standard. As we guide them, we must make sure that it is measured and deliberate. There are times when a Marine is performing exceptionally well and leaders be-



Leaders must prove by actions that our core values—honor, courage, and commitment—are not just empty words. (Photo by Cpl Kathryn Bynum.)

gin to groom him for “the fast track” consisting of meritorious promotions, awards, and competitive assignments. It is quite possible to accelerate a Marine too quickly. When that happens, we discredit the rank, and we make it much more difficult for the Marine to be competent. I read a commentary once where the author made the statement “Marines rise to their level of incompetence;” this is very thought provoking. As leaders, we must foster an environment for our Marines to become competent without compromising their growth.

The other component to credibility, character—determines how competency is applied. As leaders, we can train our Marines to be competent. We cannot train them to have character; however, it can be cultivated.

At its root, character is how an individual applies the morals, values, and ethics that he believes. One of the methods by which we as an institution cultivate character is in the establishment of our core values: honor, courage, and commitment. These are among the first things an individual learns about our organization as they strive to earn the title of U.S. Marine, but as leaders, we must prove by example that these are not empty words. As a young Marine sees these values lived out by his leaders and mentors, he will embrace these values and adopt them. It must be noted that character is a choice—it can be influenced—but the individual must elect it himself. Because character relates to morals, and morals quite simply are the belief in the difference between right and wrong, it is important to emphasize the need for spiritual fitness. The conduct issues our Corps is currently experiencing all relate to a lapse in or lack of character. Examine each case closely, and you will find an individual who lacks spiritual fitness. It has been my experience that we as Marine leaders fail to emphasize its importance or even to recognize it as relevant. Yet one’s faith addresses fundamental core issues, the answers to which will give an individual purpose, conviction, and direction. It will provide a lens through which to view and will affect how they conduct themselves.

Character is built one decision at a time, like a brick wall, but if there isn’t a solid foundation, it is only a matter of time until the wall will fall. This is why so often when Marines do fall they have to re-examine how they arrived at their current state and who they are. From personal experience, I once found that the man that I was and the man that I wanted to be were very far apart. When I chose genuine integrity and made spiritual fitness a priority, I soon found that my character became more than a set of ideals held; instead, it became a life lived. My foundation was set on solid rock, and I became a much better Marine. Character affects every aspect of being a Marine from our standards to our work ethic, from our discipline to our decisions.

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Through time, experience, and maturation, we can combine competency with character and thereby establish credibility. Credibility cannot be underrated. It goes before you on a new assignment, it is how you are known, and it is inextricably tied to your name. As the old saying goes, “you make a name for yourself,” and it’s better to have a good name than it is to be rich.

You can gauge your success when another Marine simply says of you to another “he’s solid, you can count on him,” or “he’s good to go.” It’s Marine language, few words but deeply understood. A friend of mine, SgtMaj Paul McKenna (then-Sergeant Major 3dMarDiv) told a group of NCOs one day “credibility grants you access.” One young infantry squad leader set his jaw and nodded approvingly while a senior Marine officer scrawled the quote on his hand, so he wouldn’t forget it. The statement is succinct and it applies to all hands, especially leaders. Credibility grants you access to the commander

who seeks out your opinion (because you are competent and have character). This is to be prized whether you’re a staff officer, a senior enlisted advisor, or simply “a Marine doing his job.” Credibility also grants you access to the junior Marines because they will trust you. This is something that can only be earned through a consistent display of character and competence. If the individual Marine will choose to be competent and have character, we can eradicate the issues of conduct plaguing us now and keep our honor clean. Do this and we can fulfill our promise to be the most ready when the Nation is least ready.

To our God, our country, and our Corps, let us remain Semper Fidelis.

USMC

