

Leadership 101

Scott Reynolds



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For the last 8 years, I have been a faculty member in the Defense Acquisition University's Executive Leadership and Coaching programs, and I thought it would be worthwhile to share our students' definition of the leader's role in establishing and running extraordinary teams.

The journey to gather the data started with a classroom discussion. I had arranged for a guest speaker who had led several successful programs, and during my introduction I started to tell a story about when he assumed command of a failing missile program. One of his first acts was placing PowerPoint slides in every cubicle that read, "Be on contract by July." He continued to emphasize this point over the next few days, individually asking each team member, "How is what you are working on right now helping this team get on contract by July?" At this point, a Marine Corps colonel stopped me and said: "Scott, this is Leadership 101. Please don't tell me that is what we will be focusing on this morning."

This colonel was a decorated war hero, and in only one week had earned the respect of his peers and the faculty. He was a leader beyond leadership 101. Or was he? I then asked him what his program's purpose was. Somewhat flustered, he gave an answer. Next I asked, "Who are three people on your program who report directly to you, and what are their phone numbers?" You can see where I was going. When I called the direct reports and asked them the same question, none of them articulated the same purpose as the colonel and none of them aligned with each other. It seems leadership 101 is easy to identify but hard to implement.

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That experience made me realize that we had been assuming a level of leadership self-awareness that did not exist in our students. They were successful, and their success was directly related to their leadership qualities. But in many cases they couldn't connect their actions to leadership traits they possessed. This was very disconcerting. Without understanding their leadership strengths, how could they effectively mentor their subordinates? To encourage self-awareness, I started a program in which students in small groups define the characteristics of extraordinary teams. This often takes several sessions. After they have defined an extraordinary team, I then ask, "What roles does a leader play on those teams?" I've done this many times with many different groups. While their answers vary, the following points have consistently been identified as the traits a leader must possess to lead an extraordinary team. I'm calling them Leadership 101.

The first role a leader must fill is to set direction and establish goals. But my colonel friend thought he had done

Figure 1. Raptor's Unique Attributes



this. So the deeper question is how to set a direction and establish goals that lead to extraordinary teams. Our learners have come to agree on two points that must be present. The first point is that the leader must know and define the "Why" of the organization. As an executive coach, I was working with the PM of the F-22 Raptor program. This program had existed for years. Yet I discovered in the program's information briefs it was common to list the features of the aircraft—advanced avionics, stealth and super aerodynamics. The question leadership must be able to answer and articulate is why we need those features—the benefits, if you will. Or said another way, what defense problems does the F-22 program solve? We created two PowerPoint slides that did just that (Figures 1 and 2).

The leader's messaging on direction and goals also must address both the rational and emotional elements within people. People are not like Spock from the Starship Enterprise. We are emotional. So in addition to having clear and rational goals, leaders must provide goals that touch emotional needs. To do so, you do not use data. You use stories and pictures. One Army officer in charge of installing computer cabling on Army bases used the PowerPoint slides in Figures 3 and 4 to highlight that his organization was responsible for connecting the Army to the world. When showing the slides, he told engaging stories about how the connectivity they provided saved lives in battle and let soldiers overseas communicate with family back home. He closed by listing several tangible and very rational goals for the next year. He touched the emotional and rational buttons of his team.

Manifestation of Culture

The second role of a leader is to set the team's culture. Culture is the way a team behaves based on the values, rituals, heroes and symbols they accept and which are passed along by imitation from one generation to the next. Values tend to range along continuums—for example, transparency, secrecy; collaboration, isolation; empowerment, micromanagement, etc.

Figure 2. The Synergy of Stealth and Super Aerodynamics



Figure 3. Connecting the Army . . .



Many values remain unconscious and unwritten to those who hold them. Therefore, those values often cannot be discussed nor directly observed by others. Values can only be inferred from how people behave under different circumstances. Symbols, heroes and rituals are the tangible or visual aspects of the practices of a culture. The true cultural meaning of the practices is intangible: This is revealed only when the practices are interpreted by the insiders. If a team's direction is set through a combination of rational and emotional arguments, setting culture is an emotional pull.

Hands down, I believe the military Service that has done the best job of setting its culture is the Marine Corps. All four Services attend our program, but I've found the only Service whose members can articulate their culture—values, rituals, symbols and heroes—is the Marine Corps. People in other Services struggle to explain their cultural norms, but ironically they usually can define the Marine Corps culture. How have the Marines achieved this? First, they have defining slogans: (1) Every Marine is a rifleman, (2) officers eat last, (3) with the sun comes the guns, and (4) the Few, the Proud, the Marines. These have not changed over time. Second, their rituals and rewards reinforce the slogans. For example, during their annual "birthday" celebration, Marines will travel many miles to attend a ceremonial cake cutting in which the oldest Marine in the room will serve the youngest and the Marine Corps commandant, via video messaging, will remind everyone of the proud traditions of Marines. There are no ex-Marines! Extraordinary teams have leaders that don't let culture happen by itself. They drive the culture needed for the team to excel.

The third role of a leader is to provide a winning environment. When discussing this role, our learners' initial focus often is on resources. That is, does the team have the right people, enough money, workable schedule, the proper materials and access to information? In times of austere budgets, studies have suggested leaders often take on too much risk in schedule, performance and cost commitments. So teams every day arrive to work with data suggesting they are failing in their

Figure 4. . . . to the World



primary duties. In many of those instances, the leaders failed their teams.

As our students progress into a deeper analysis of what it means to provide a winning environment, they feel the leader must build spheres of influence that allow him or her to have sway with key stakeholders and their own chain of command. In "Empowering Yourself," Harvey Coleman suggests the formula for successful leaders is PIE—Performance, Image and Exposure. They must perform exceptionally well, cultivate the proper image and manage exposure so that the right people will know them. It is important to note that leaders are not doing this for personal satisfaction or gain, but to provide a winning environment for their teams by having the influence needed to get things done. The author weighted the three elements as follows: Performance, 10 percent; Image, 30 percent; and Exposure, 60 percent. These interesting ratios suggest that having a good reputation is only part of the equation; one must make sure there is a wide exposure of that reputation.

In addition, our students believe a leader must create an environment for the team to evaluate and learn as it performs (some students listed this trait under culture). In the book "Clear Leadership," Gervase Bushe says the rapid rate of change in the world today often means our internal mental models for addressing challenges no longer apply. I believe this is what Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall means when he asks us to "think." He is asking us to design our way forward. To design your way forward, your team must constantly work to improve. After meetings, reviews and decisions, a leader must hold timely discussions on what worked and on what could be improved in the next meeting, review or decision process. You are not assigned as a leader to maintain the status quo.

The fourth role of a leader is to provide mentorship—that is, to grow the team. The last paragraph was about improving the synergy amongst team members. This is about the

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performance of individual members of the team. All leaders claim to care about their teams. What separates the leaders of extraordinary teams is that they go beyond saying they care to developing plans and strategies for demonstrating their concern for their employees' growth and well-being. It is on their calendar. For example, one of my coaching clients built people growth into his strategy and measurement system. He received quarterly reports that measured: (1) promotions, both internal and external, (2) training hours, (3) overtime hours, and (4) awards related to improved performance. Discussions then would be held to capture what drove good numbers and which areas needed improvement. This created a culture in which all members of the senior leadership team saw growing the next generation of leaders as part of their primary duty.

The fifth and final role of a leader as defined by the students is to set the standards of performance and boundary conditions. Our learners often struggle in their talks on what makes good and bad boundary conditions. Let me explain using a shipping lane metaphor to describe how bad boundaries can limit team success. Those who have been to sea on a military vessel are familiar with the Captain's Standing Orders. These orders set the boundary conditions for when the captain should be informed of shipboard conditions. They usually include comments on how close another vessel can approach or when a weather condition change requires the captain's notification.

Picture the entrance to any major port of the United States. We have shipping lanes, and some distance from the shipping lanes there is shoal water. Navy doctrine allows Navy ships to enter ports outside the shipping lanes. To reduce the risk of a mishap, the Navy provides doctrine on the size of the buffer the Navy vessels must give both the shipping lanes and the shoals. In a way, they have provided a box in which the vessels can operate. Vessel Commanding Officers (COs), not wanting

to get in trouble, write their Standing Orders so that the buffer on each side is larger—to make sure they stay in the box. This means the box the Navy ship can operate in is now much smaller. The Officer Of the Deck (OOD), not wanting to get in trouble with the CO, issues orders to the helmsman increasing the buffer given to both the shoals and shipping lanes. The box for the ship to operate in has once again been reduced.

The poor helmsman, not wanting to get in trouble with the OOD, stays on a straight line. There is no room for movement. Soon these boundaries are not considered discretionary but are required operating procedures. My students have concluded that the key for successful boundary condition setting is for leaders to adjust the boundaries to match the talents of their people, not to constrict them. The boundaries should change as the people change and grow.

As for setting standards of performance, our students feel "one gets what one accepts." Leaders must set and enforce standards of performance that drive results. One of my first coaching clients stressed his team should deliver what it promises across the spectrum of cost, schedule and performance. One of his commanders made bold projections about his product and stuck with them even after careful and detailed questioning. My client then created a large poster that highlighted the next scheduled milestone on the commander's program. As the date approached, the commander came forward and admitted he couldn't deliver on his promise. In response, my client held an all-hands meeting and made the failure public and stressed how this example counters all this team stood for as the warfighter's trusted provider of capability. The culture of that organization changed that day as new heroes were identified and new stories described the team. My client expected excellence, and, in holding his team to that standard, he received it, and that excellence became a key element of team pride. The team members saw their standards of performance as differentiators from other teams.

In summary, we've asked the senior executives chosen to lead DoD's most difficult acquisition challenges to reflect on the roles leaders must undertake to build extraordinary teams. Their consensus opinion is that a leader sets a direction and makes sure the team knows why. A leader sets team values, rituals and symbols and identifies and rewards those heroes modeling them. A leader provides a winning environment in which the resources are right, external influences are controlled and teams constantly grow and improve. A leader cares about and grows each team member. Finally, a leader sets and enforces standards of performance.

My experience is that few leaders reach the 101 level of performance. They let the tyranny of today's challenges distract their focus on fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. I challenge you to review your calendar and see how much of your time is committed to Leadership 101. 

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