

10 Aspects of Leadership for Army Commanders

1. Believe In What You Do

Lead with passion and conviction. This makes the difference between a mediocre unit and an outstanding one, or an average person and an outstanding individual. Ask yourself what you believe in, what you stand for, and what motivates and fires you up. Then use that passion to infect others around you, so that every opportunity is used to influence more positively and powerfully the lives of those you lead. Believe in what you do and why you do it. Do not simply go through the motions. Believe that you make a difference. When others see that you believe in what you do, they will be more inspired and likely to share in your commitment, dedication and passion.

2. Set Your Goals High

Lead with vision and high standards of excellence. Resist the temptation to look for the easiest way of the minimum that you can get away with. You will not have stretched yourself, and will have nothing to feel proud about at the end of the day. Your soldiers may initially like the idea that you are easy with standards or with discipline, but they will certainly not respect you for it. What they want is a collective vision – a mission or goal that they can take direction from and set their sights on. Simple goals will do, but set them with high standards. You should not be satisfied with the status quo, or with mediocrity. If there is something worth doing, it is worth doing well, and to the best of your ability. You should always be searching and striving for greater excellence – always growing, always reaching for the stars. When you reach for the stars, even if you do not get stars, you certainly will not have mud in your hands. If all our commanders aim that much higher, we will go that much farther as an Army.

3. Know Your Job Well

Lead with professionalism and competence. To be a leader, your soldiers will expect you to be technically and tactically proficient. Know your job, and theirs too, well enough to tell them what to do and how to do it, and be good enough yourself to show them how. Believe in yourself. You have been trained well. You must however continue to learn well, and hone and improve on your skills so that you can be excellent in your field. Be confident that you have what it takes to do your job well, and be willing and quick to learn in areas that you may not yet know so well. “Follow me and do as I do!” is a much more powerful way to inspire your men than “Do as I say!” – but you can only do so with confidence, and you can only lead by example, if you first know your job well.

4. Learn From Others

Lead with humility. Even as you show confidence, you must also be humble, ready and willing to learn from others. At one point or other, you will find yourself inexperienced in the face of more experienced Officers and Specialists. Take the opportunity to learn from them with a humble heart and an earnest mind. Nurture a discipline of thinking and learning. There is nothing to be embarrassed about not knowing, but there is something to be embarrassed about not asking, and there is everything to be embarrassed about not learning. In every situation, there is something to learn if you have the humility to want to learn it. If you show interest, humility and an open mind, those more experienced than you will be more forthcoming with their advice and support. And those below you will be more patient and trusting of your leadership.

5. Make Things Happen

Lead with decision and action. Your soldiers will expect you to make things happen; and not just wait for things to happen or for someone else to take that initiative; or worse, not even know what happened! The first is the mark of a leader, the second a follower, and the third a loser. Make things happen, and make sure these things that happen are the right things to the best of your judgement. Your soldiers equally expect that you make decision and take actions wisely and in a sound and timely manner – because they are affected by the consequences if you do not. Many times, not making a decision is in itself the wrong decision; and no action is in itself the wrong action. Be proactive, take the initiative, and make the right things happen for yourself, your soldiers and your unit.

6. Take Responsibility When You Are Wrong

Lead with courage and integrity. It is easy to stand tall and take credit whenever your unit does well or when there is praise all round. It is not so easy to stand up to take the rap when things do not go so well. Resist the urge to pass the buck to someone else or blame your soldiers. There will indeed be times when things go wrong. Your soldiers will expect that you will have the integrity and courage to take responsibility for your actions, even when and especially when you are the one who is wrong. Everybody makes mistakes, especially when you are doing something for the first time. Refrain from pushing the blame down to your subordinates and soldiers. Quietly accept responsibility and learn from the mistake. Your maturity and integrity will earn you greater respect than your wrongdoing had gained you criticism.

7. Keep Going Even When The Going Gets Tough

Lead with determination. It is not enough to set a goal or have an action plan if you cannot last the distance. In a navigation exercise, to get to your objective, you first need to set the direction with your compass. Then you must pace out the distance until you get there, regardless whether there is a thorn bush, hill or river in your way. Over, under or around – nothing stands in your way. To overcome and accomplish your goal will require physical fitness and mental toughness. Your soldiers will expect you to have the stamina, discipline and determination to go on – because they will give up if you do. As a leader, you must keep going even when, and especially when, the going gets tough.

8. Care For Your Soldiers

Lead with your heart. Even as you push for high standards through tough training, your soldiers will expect you to know them well. Understand their strengths and weaknesses, recognise when they put in the extra effort, and look out for their well-being. Well-being is not the same as welfare – which is no doubt important – but welfare does not always lead to well-being in the longer term. Tough and realistic training is important, and this must be balanced with care for your soldiers. Your soldiers want to know that you care, because they are entrusting their lives in your hands. Your care must be genuine and selfless, because they will see through you if you are insincere. No extent of experience in command, no amount of discussion on core values, or lessons on leadership and management can ever be good enough to make you a good leader if you do not feel passionately for the people who work for you, and about the people for whom you work. As a leader, you have a basic responsibility to care for the people you lead – even if it is for one training day. Take the time and trouble to find out what concerns your soldiers, and what their motivations and passions might be. Show them that you care.

9. Keep Your Communication Lines Open

Lead through mutual trust and understanding. You must not assume that your soldiers do not or will not understand what is happening. Keep them informed about the reasons for actions and decisions. Communicate. The morale in a unit is low when the soldiers have no clue what is going on, lower still if they have reason to believe that their commander is not telling them what or why, and lowest when they know their commander will not listen. Only if you keep your lines open, can you build trust and confidence. Tell your soldiers why whenever you have the time to explain, so that they will trust you and not need to question why when you clearly do not have the time to explain, when in the heat of battle or crisis. Keep those lines of communication open so that you know what is going on in their hearts and in their minds, and so that they know what is going on in yours.

10. Build A Strong Team

Lead through teamwork. One of your key priorities as a leader must be to get the people in your command to work together. When you can build a strong team, people will find ways to work together and want to do more, rather than fight with each other over whom should do less. Your soldiers want you to make them work together as a team – to build them up and forge them together. They want you to help them gain confidence in you, and also in themselves and the other soldiers around them. This sense of cohesion and bonding, esprit de corps and spirit of not wanting to let the team down is a basic need for all soldiers, and is the kind of team spirit that will help win over any difficulty or adversity.

Leading soldiers well does not come automatically, and certainly not just because you wear the rank. But a leader in our Army is what you are, and a good leader is what we expect you to be. Be confident that you have what it takes to be a good leader of men. Without confidence in yourself, you may fumble and stumble when you should not. Without confidence in yourself, you cannot expect your soldiers to have confidence in you, or to believe in you as their leader. But self-confidence and dignity must not be confused with arrogance and self-pride. To be a leader, you must also have the humility to know when to follow the advice and learn from the example of others who have walked the road before you. It will be your leadership example, dedication and humility that will determine whether your men follow you grudgingly; or willingly with confidence, respect and trust. Ultimately it is your passion for people, professionalism and excellence that will inspire and motivate others to follow, and keep you always striving to do better and reach higher as a leader – for that mission or goal in your life.

Strong and effective leadership everywhere in our Army is of fundamental and utmost importance. Your leadership role and example will be crucial in our efforts to deal with the expanding spectrum of operations, move ahead in our transformation initiatives, create NS experiences that our servicemen will cherish, and strengthen the values and institutions that mark our professionalism as an Army. It begins with your commitment and passion in leading our soldiers well.

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March 2004