

# SNCO Leadership

## The lead sled dog

by MGSgt Charles A. Walker

I often use analogies. Perhaps it's the storyteller in me. Using analogies is certainly an effective method of conveying the significance or deeper meaning of a given topic. Analogies are often used to present a perspective that would otherwise be overlooked. As I contemplate the role of SNCOs, the analogy of the sled dog comes to mind.

I've never been around sled dogs. What I know of them comes from reading Jack London and Robert Service and from watching the Iditarod. They fascinate me. A dog sled team in action evokes adventure and challenge. Even the spectator knows that a tremendous amount of training, teamwork, and endurance are required. Several things should be noted when observing a dog sled team, and several lessons can be learned.

When the musher walks out to the dogs with harness in tow, the dogs begin to yelp with excitement. They jump and tug on their leads, trying to break free. They want to run, they want to pull the sled, and they want to do what they've been trained to do. The dogs are paired up side by side all along the line, but with a single dog in the front: the lead sled dog.

The lead sled dog is more experienced. The lead sled dog once worked further back down the line but was selected from among the pack to move up into a place of leadership. The other dogs know the lead sled dog and follow its example. Each dog is supposed to thrust its chest into the harness and pull when it's time to run, and if they don't, another dog has to pull its weight. When a dog fails to pull its weight or attempts to run in a direction off course, the lead sled dog steps in. The lead sled dog corrects the miscreant by snapping, growling, or nipping its haunches. The race can only be won by the team that works together. The lead sled dog lis-

**>MGSgt Walker is an 0369 (infantry unit leader) currently serving as the operations chief, 4th Marine Regiment. He was wounded in combat in Iraq while serving as a platoon sergeant with 3d Battalion, 7th Marines.**



**SNCOs are more experienced. Their leadership is crucial. (Photo by LCpl David N. Hershey)**

tens closely to the musher. It is the lead sled dog that turns the team left or right when given the command, or often without command. The lead sled dog is experienced and knows terrain. It knows what is expected of the team. Though the musher gives commands, it is the lead sled dog that sets the pace. A musher with a winning dog sled team will tell that you he has learned much from his dogs and holds the lead sled dog in high regard. And so it is with SNCOs.

SNCOs have worked their way up the line. They are experienced. They've run a few races. They were selected to be lead sled dogs not based only on their past performance, but, more importantly, on their potential for future service. They know what it's like further down the line near the whip's crack. They've experienced both the thrill of

the run and the exhaustion from grueling training. They've received honors and praises when winning a race, and know the harsh scolding that comes with failure. These experiences make them work harder; they want to win. When the musher comes out with the harness, the dogs work themselves into a frenzy, eager to begin the race. It is the SNCO—the lead sled dog—who methodically and deliberately takes his place up front and, by example, tells the pack "follow me."

All of the dogs are anchored with a common tie; they are literally bound to each other. We Marines are bound to each other. We have a history, a heritage, a legacy. As SNCOs, we are keepers of the culture. Our culture is at risk and we must proactively prevent any degradation. We must circulate among our Marines, our pack, to

maintain realistic situational awareness, probe the lines. One of my mentors taught me the value of what he called "LBWA": leadership by walking around. We must display a professional curiosity and sometimes literally ask, "Hey, Marine, what's going on here?"

barriers as we headed outside the wire to face the enemy. This habit of thought must remain. The moment we see something wrong and fail to make a correction, a new standard is established—a lower one. Once the correction is made and the teaching

My fellow SNCOs, I urge you to remember that you are the lead sled dogs. We set the pace, we lead from the front, and we police the pack. As I hear our Commandant call for a re-awakening of our Corps' values, as he and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps directly address our corporals and sergeants, I urge you to assure our senior leaders that "we've got this." In order for this to happen, we must focus our efforts on developing our NCOs to "own the problem." They will be the SNCOs who replace us in the future. Not only the tomorrow but also the today of our Corps is at stake. SNCOs, our race is not over. We must run the good race, fight the good fight. The pack will follow our lead.

A final note to the lead sled dog: Remember the musher. The musher is that Marine officer commanding the dog sled team. He calls out the commands, but the lead sled dog is the one who turns the team, runs faster or slower, and bites the other dogs' haunches when they step out of line. In a manner of speaking, you could say that the musher is just along for the ride, but take caution: yes, he is the one who may get the trophy (or medal) when the race is won, but he is also the one who takes responsibility should the team fail. The dogs simply don't eat that night. No one remembers the failing team's dogs' names, but they remember the musher. The musher, the lead sled dog, and the pack must hold each other in proper regard, and above all, work as a team. As Rudyard Kipling said, "For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack."<sup>1</sup> The veterans who ran before us are watching, and so are the Marines following in our tracks. We cannot let them down. We are anchored to them, and they to us.

**The moment we see something wrong and fail to make a correction, a new standard is established—a lower one.**

Too often a blind eye is turned or we miss an opportunity to teach. We as SNCOs cannot yell as a coach on the sidelines. We must be in the race with the dogs. The Marines must see our example and we must be kinetically engaged. As a young platoon sergeant I remember daily reading "Complacency Kills" painted on the HESCO

moment occurs, the opportunity to mentor the NCOs present cannot be missed. Another leader once told me, "Your Marines don't care what you know, but they know when you don't care." Some in the pack have lost their way. As SNCOs, we must bring them back into the pack, show them by example.

**Recently Moved or Promoted?**  
Then It's Time to Update Your Member Record

**START HERE**

**EASY to do Anywhere You Have an Internet Connection**  
[www.mca-marines.org](http://www.mca-marines.org)

**Marine Corps Association & Foundation**  
Advancing Leadership and Recognizing Excellence Since 1953

**Note**

1. Kipling, Rudyard, *The Second Jungle Book*, Macmillan Publishers, United Kingdom, 1895.

