

SNCOs Lead, Officers Command

The method of application
by MGSgt Charles A. Walker

SNCOs lead, officers command. Before that comment draws ire, let me be clear. I do not imply that officers are not leaders, but rather, as commanders, their leadership is more strategic. They are the decision makers upon whose shoulders the responsibility of accomplishing the mission lie. The officer is responsible for the success or failure of the unit or mission. The SNCO's responsibility is more at the tactical level. They can absolutely impact the operational and strategic (and, as advisors, should always do so); however, the application of their leadership is personal interaction, Marine to Marine. A commander is forced to look two terrain features down, to steer the organization, to anticipate friction, and to make decisions that ensure mission accomplishment. The SNCO must advise the commander in these matters, but must keep his eyes on the tanglefoot, the messy work that will hinder either the unit or more often the individual Marine.

As I look back over my career, I have served with many fine Marine officers, men who were highly intelligent, polished, brilliant decision makers who possessed the ability to inspire their Marines. History will prove many of these officers to be among our legends and heroes. However, the Marines who made the biggest impact, who influenced me the most, were all SNCOs. The reason for this is simple: They were the ones who were personally involved. They were the ones who taught and mentored. One of my mentors, a master gunnery sergeant with 30 years of service, once told me that "no Marine with black on his collar ever made a

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decision—the shiny ones do that." At first I didn't receive the comment well. I had already been an SNCO for several years and had made many decisions, some good and some bad. I had great respect for the sage, however, and thought it wise to mull it over. Soon I understood what "master guns" was saying in his dry, midwestern manner. An SNCO advises the commander, but it is the commander who must make the decision. Sometimes he will heed the SNCO's advice, other times he will consider it, yet make a contrary decision. The SNCO then takes the decision

and turns it into action. The SNCO leads the Marines to accomplish the mission maintaining the commander's intent. A commander should be able to trust his SNCOs, step aside, and allow them the latitude to accomplish the mission as they see fit. The SNCO can set conditions for this environment by being technically and tactically proficient, never straying from the commander's intent, and, most importantly, executing the task as though it were his decision. Nothing will wound morale in a unit more than division between the SNCOs and officer corps. We must be united: one team, one fight.

Another illustration of this relationship was given to me by my first platoon sergeant. I stood in platoon formation as a private first class in "Echo 2/6" as the staff sergeant said, "This is a family. The lieutenant is your daddy and I am your mama." I initially shirked from the analogy that seemed contrary to my



The SNCO's responsibility is at the tactical level. (Photo by Col Antonio Rubio.)



SNCOs are the translators from the officer to the Marine. (Photo by GySgt Stephen Traynham.)

perception of an infantry unit leader. He went on to say:

You don't see daddy that much. He's gone to work all day. When he comes home I give him an update on what's going on. He's the head of the household. We discuss all matters, but he makes the final decision. When you really get out of line he administers the punishment. However, the major role of managing the home and the family lies with me—your mama. I spend all day with you. I know you better than your daddy does. I keep you in line, teach you, and supervise you. I defer to daddy's decision, but [said with a smirk and twinkle in his eye] I can generally persuade daddy to do things my way.

I've thought of my platoon sergeant's analogy many times over the years. His homespun southern humor taught me how to simplify concepts and teach them to Marines in a way they will both understand and remember. I also learned not to underestimate the wisdom and experience possessed by SNCOs who more often than not have been taught by years of service vice a brick and mortar school.

As SNCOs we must be able to effectively communicate, knowing our audience. We must be able to transition quickly from speaking with senior officers to the most junior enlisted Marines. The concept is akin to being bilingual.

An example of this is seen in the company gunnery sergeant briefing during regimental commander delivers during battlefield circulation. The gunny tells the CO, "Sir, we had positive identification of an armed combatant in the conduct of a hostile act against friendly forces and engaged with a measured response according to the rules of engagement." When the incident occurred, the gunny simply told the lance corporal, "Drop that dirt bag." It was a succinct direction, spoken in plain language, given in a familiar tone and manner the Marine rifleman understood. The gunnery sergeant was able to look at the big picture but operate within a single frame, within the current sight picture. Most importantly, he knew how to talk to Marines.

All Marine leaders, enlisted and officer alike, share the same leadership traits and principles. We operate in the same climate and place. The difference is simply in the method of application. The officer publishes guidance and provides intent, the SNCO remains personally involved as the Marines then execute; while doing so, he coaches, teaches, and mentors. The SNCO must at all times be approachable and, most importantly, involved. We must maintain fidelity with our officers and simply lead our Marines.



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