

Servant Leadership

It's about them

by MGySgt Charles A. Walker

Leadership is, above all other things, a human endeavor. It is the leader's application of intangible qualities to inspire others to follow. Among the various styles of leadership, the one often underutilized is that of the servant leader. The servant leader knows first and foremost it is not about *him* but rather about *them*. In fact, the servant leader adheres to a radical, yet fundamental concept of "they don't work for me; I work for them." He chooses humility and is confident kindness is not weakness. The servant leader does not seek recognition or expect to be treated differently than any other Marine. A leader who believes he is entitled to a parking space or a prominent display of his name must use caution. If the Marines perceive that the leader maintains an air of importance, then when they render customs and courtesies, it will be grudgingly. The irony is for the servant leader, the same "VIP treatment" will be given—but out of a genuine respect and admiration vice simply a compliance to protocol.

The Marine who chooses to exercise servant leadership will develop in his subordinates a loyalty and admiration unmatched. These Marines will, in turn, emulate those qualities and employ them when their time comes to lead. This style and these qualities are best understood when observed in action, but for the reader, the vignettes described below will have to suffice.

It is not long after recruit training when a young Marine is caught by surprise the first time he lines up for chow in a field mess. He is told, to his delight, that Marines are to line up in rank order junior to senior! The privates, PFCs, and lance corporals eat first. The second shock comes when he finds staff NCOs and officers serving chow. What an excellent introduction to the way things

>MGySgt Walker was the Operations Chief, III MEF, when he wrote this article.

are done "in the fleet." The lesson hits home even further when hot chow runs out, leaving the most senior Marines consuming yet another MRE. Having dined with sister Services in various environments, this most certainly is "a Marine thing." This tradition personifies our priorities and commitment to our young Marines while reminding our Marine leaders to be humble. It is a simple and effective way to remind our Marines and ourselves of what is important, and it should be the standard practice of every Marine unit in the field.

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During the spring of 2004, in the Al Anbar province of Iraq, the Marine Corps was engaged in some of the bloodiest fighting of this generation. 3d Bn, 7th Marines were in Al Qa'im near the Syrian border. In Kilo Company, a squad leader sat behind the plywood partition that separated the billeting area from the company watch. The corporal was preparing a patrol order; his platoon was scheduled to go outside the wire the following day. The staff sergeant on watch observed as two fire team leaders stopped by to invite the

squad leader to go to chow with them. Chow consisted of tray-ration scrambled eggs often referred to as "egg loaf," but it was hot. The squad leader declined and insisted he had to prepare his patrol order. This reflected his character and work ethic. He could have easily regurgitated the platoon commander's order or defaulted to an attitude of "we're going to the same place to do the same thing, no need to invest all of this effort into writing an order." However, this corporal was a sturdy professional. A short time later, the two fire team leaders returned with a hot tray for their squad leader. This action reflected the affection and concern for the welfare of their fellow Marine. This act was modeled by the squad leader and other leaders throughout the company. It became a commonplace event few took notice of. However, the staff sergeant took notice and reflected on it the next day when that squad leader, Cpl Jason Dunham, acted heroically and selflessly, proving "there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."¹ As a result of his selfless action, the lives of two Marines were saved, including one of those fire team leaders. Cpl Dunham was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. By laying down his life to protect his fellow Marines, Cpl Dunham displayed the utmost form of servant leadership and made the ultimate sacrifice.

Over ten years later, in the autumn of 2015 on Camp Schwab in Okinawa, a company gunnery sergeant stood in front of another rifle company. 2d Bn, 9th Marines served as a forward deployed battalion in the Pacific. The company first sergeant had recently given the Marines a liberty brief before the commencement of a holiday weekend. The company gunny then delivered news that a working party was required



A good leader recognizes a Marine's hard work regardless of time or place. (Photo by LCpl Dalton Swanbeck.)

at the pier for offload over the liberty period. The Marines, with apprehension, waited to hear who was assigned this duty and were stunned when informed that the company gunnery sergeant, the company first sergeant, the company commander and executive officer, the platoon sergeants, and the platoon commanders would comprise the work detail. He then finished with "Happy Birthday Marines; Semper Fidelis!" The example set left a deep impression on each member of that company. Sometime in the future, one of these young platoon commanders may very well be a general officer. For certain, he will be grateful for having an SNCO model servant leadership during his formative years as a young leader. He will remember it well.

The servant leader develops the ability to communicate to his Marines that he truly recognizes and values their contribution to the unit and the mission. In order to be approachable, he approaches them, exercising "leadership by walking around." This personal contact will allow the leader to receive perspective from Marines "in the trenches." An example of this is seen in the forward deployed regimental commander who walks past a field wireman digging a trench to bury cable. The commander tells the Marine he knows what he is doing is tedious, hard work but it is

vitaly important so *we* (not he, the commander) have the ability to communicate, facilitating the ability to command and control *our* units distributed across the battlespace. He thanks the Marine for his efforts and encourages him. In the five-minute conversation, the commander communicated that he recognizes the Marine's hard work,

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conveyed its relevance to the mission, and thanked him for his service, all the while fostering a sense of *us*, *the team*, and *the unit*. As he walks away, the wireman continues his task, now with more vigor, enthusiasm, and a greater sense of being a part of something bigger than himself. The Marine's loyalty to the commander and his pride in the unit increase daily within this type of command environment. This is key to building *esprit de corps*.

Each of these vignettes varies in scope, but the message, the example, is the same. Selflessness, and placing a greater value on the Marines, led over the interest of self. One must be

reminded that, in military service, the key word is service; the giving of yourself for something greater. It is part of our history and our heritage. This attitude and example were seen by all in what is now referred to as "the Greatest Generation," when our country overwhelmingly came together and contributed in some way to the war effort of World War II. This example was modeled by one of our country's founding fathers, George Washington, when he was nominated to serve as our Nation's first president, he said,

I beg it be remembered by every gentleman in the room that I this day declare with utmost sincerity I do not think myself equal to the Command I am honored with.²

The humility displayed should be noted and remembered by all who hold a position of leadership in our Corps. Our Corps instills pride, but pride must be tempered so that ambition leads to success but not to vanity. Certainly, there are privileges that come with rank, but a leader of genuine character will not develop a sense of entitlement; rather he humbly accepts them with grace. This can frequently be seen when a young officer, upon returning an enlisted Marine's salute, says simply, "Thank you." Servant leadership will cement bonds of mutual respect across rank and age. Every Marine leader should be encouraged and reminded to apply servant leadership, and it must be genuine. Not only will this serve our Corps well today but, when that Marine folds his uniform, places it in the footlocker, and returns home a better citizen, he will take that lesson with him and apply it in his home and community. Our country could use some leaders like that, so let us cultivate them now.

Notes

1. John 15:13, *Holy Bible* (New Living Translation).
2. *The Writings of George Washington: Life of Washington*, edited by Jared Sparks, (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1847).

