

CAROLINA MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

Principles and Traits of Marine Corps Leadership, Part XII

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A year ago, we began publishing each month in “Front and Center” a discussion of one principle of Marine Corps leadership and one trait of a leader. Last month, we finished our consideration of the eleven principles of leadership and the eleventh of fourteen leadership traits. This month we will consider the three remaining traits of a Marine leader: knowledge, loyalty, and enthusiasm. Next month, we will complete our year-long study of the principles and traits of Marine Corps leadership with a summary review having the goal of recognizing the kind of men and women who display as qualities of character the traits of a leader skilled at putting into action the principles of leadership recognized by the Marine Corps.

The effort to understand what knowledge is and how it is attained is one of the oldest and most constant occupations in western thought. As a trait of a Marine leader, however, understanding what knowledge is presents little difficulty. Knowledge is the understanding of various specialized subjects obtained both through study and experience. Knowledge acquired through experience and study in the Marine Corps embraces the totality of what Marines do, such as learning how to wear a uniform and to

care for it, learning to use, clean, and maintain firearms, learning to fly aircraft, maintain mechanical equipment, and getting supplies where they need to be at the right times. Although not all of the skills Marines seek to understand are equally demanding to learn, all require focus and practice to master. Moreover, one can expand the scope of his value to a unit by seeking to understand information and skills related to his specialty but not directly within it. As with all forms of knowledge human beings can seek to master, perhaps the most important test of mastery, especially for knowledge we might think of as more intellectual than physical, is that one can explain it easily and clearly to others.

Loyalty is an interesting trait of character since it includes within it such related qualities as discipline, selflessness, resistance to temptation, and not infrequently, courage. The demands of loyalty may be thought of as both immediately before us, requiring particular actions now, and also general, meaning the responsibilities of loyalty don't require of us particular actions now, but rather effect our general approach to life and conduct. Immediate demands of loyalty may include working to improve one's skill as a Marine, thus strengthening the leadership trait of knowledge, following the orders of one's supervisor as well as one can, offering assistance to fellow Marines when needed, and refusing to participate in gossip that can cause needless friction and damage morale. We can think about loyalty as a character trait to be displayed in a more general way by considering whether, as individuals and as communities, we have obligations to the generations of Americans who have preceded us and are no longer here, and to those generations who are yet to be born. We do this, for example, when we remember those who lost their lives in combat, and also when we celebrate important events in our history such as recalling the generation of Americans who declared American independence from the British Empire, and who fought and often died to secure it. We do it also when we resolve to conduct ourselves in such a way as to maintain and even improve a way of life we can pass on to our children and grandchildren to their benefit. In this we may understand something of the value of the Marine Corps virtue of commitment.

Discussions of enthusiasm often invoke words like "energetic" and "positive" which are good descriptions of what someone looks like when work is done with enthusiasm. We might also think profitably about the relationship, if any, between loyalty and enthusiasm. Does a natural loyalty to Corps and country inspire enthusiasm in us? We might think so when we consider that the recognized traits of a Marine leader include unselfishness, endurance, integrity, dependability, and bearing, all of which are traits of character one must make an effort to develop. We may think, therefore, that such a person has a natural sense of enthusiasm for life in general which expresses itself as enthusiasm in work as a Marine, or in any other enterprise of life. However, we have nearly countless instances of a young person, not sure what to do with his life, who enlists in the Marine Corps and the challenges encountered produce a sense of self and of purpose that produce enthusiasm for life.

This observation shows us that whatever occupations we have, we are human beings first, and thus it matters what kind of human being one becomes. In the western tradition, the thought concerning this is that at birth, the newborn has all the powers of human nature that his parents have. The difference is that in the child, the powers of his nature are in potential, needing to be actualized as he grows. Interestingly, this is a condition of human beings throughout life, that is, however well developed a man or a woman is, we always have unactualized or under-actualized potentials in need of development and growth. This can be put in a more practical way by saying that as one develops professionally, he is also developing personally since it is difficult for most people to separate the two. Of course, in human affairs we don't find many things that can be described in such a way that no exceptions are to be found. We can say that developing the skills of a soldier, or a teacher, or a farmer, or a craftsman require at the same time developing the virtues that are possible for human nature in general, but this isn't always so. It is clearly possible, for example, for someone to become a skilled craftsman while also becoming a dishonest and unfaithful human being.

We have commented on this over the past year as we have examined the eleven principles of Marine Corps leadership and the fourteen traits of a Marine leader, and it remains as we close here, and for next month's "Front and Center," to explain why it is that possessing traits of character like judgment, justice, decisiveness, integrity, unselfishness, and dependability constitute a person able skillfully to apply the principles of Marine leadership to the benefit of self and others, and ultimately for the benefit of Corps and country.