

### Marines Make Good Leaders

The CEO of a major corporation summons the person who would be replacing him, after only a year, and hands him three envelopes, numbered one, two and three. “What am I to do with these?” he replies. “Use one each time you find yourself having to answer to the board of directors for quarterly profit loses.” Sure enough, six months into the position, he is summoned by the board of directors, and he opens envelope number one. It says, “Blame the previous leader, and good luck.” Three months later he is summoned again, and he opens envelope number two. It states, “Blame the managers, and good luck.” And wouldn’t you know, six months later, again, the board demands his presence. Opening envelope number three, prior to entering the board room, the anointed superstar CEO is shocked to read, “Get three envelopes and label them one, two, and three.” And so it goes in corporate America. If you are looking for a wise investment, you might try stock in envelopes.

Regardless of which business, they are failing on many fronts, but the worst of which is a lack of genuine leadership, which will either lead to their demise, or at best, mediocre results. Some companies, like oil companies, post billions of dollars as profit, but it will be because of what they are charging the public, who has no better alternatives. And why is leadership their most significant failing? They don’t have an appeal, which resonates within their people, nor are they the type of leaders others are inspired to follow, due to a lack of rectitude. Marines make good leaders because they come from an organization which not only teaches leadership, but requires its use daily. In W. Brad Johnson and Gregory P. Harper’s book “Becoming a Leader the Annapolis Way,” they quote the father of the American Navy, John Paul Jones, describing the qualities of a leader:

*He [a leader] should be the soul of tact, patience, justice, firmness and charity. No meritorious act of a subordinate should escape his attention or be left to pass without its reward, even if the reward is only a word of approval. Conversely, he should not be blind to a single fault in any subordinate, though, at the same time, he should be quick and unfailing to distinguish error from malice, thoughtlessness from incompetency, and well meant shortcoming from heedless or stupid blunder. (13)*

As far back as the 1770’s, John Paul Jones was able to articulate the qualities required to be a good leader. That a leader’s character must be impeccable, he needs to be ever observant of his subordinates qualities, and shortcomings, while being capable of discerning honest effort from foolishness. The type of leadership found in an organization that not only teaches leadership, but makes being one conditional, based upon regular performance evaluations. Leadership in the Marine Corps is not just provided to the elite within the organization, but every single person, and they are expected to live it, through example to others.

How many organizations actually have a program in place to insure they are accepting only the best into their ranks? In reviewing ads for recruitment in the corporate world you read things like diversity in the workplace, stories of what a great company they are, what they have to offer, and how your career will flourish. The Marines have no use for such folly. Their ads make simple appeals with no promises, and certainly no rose gardens. Appeals documented in Albert A. Nofi’s book, “Marine Corps Book of Lists”, such as, “The Few, The Proud, The Marines” and “First to Fight.” (150) These appeals pose a subliminal question if a person has what it takes to be one of the few, along with informing the viewer immediately of what they do – fight. The Marines create warriors, and in the process they create leaders. Corporate invitations do not pose a challenge, for fear of not being politically or socially correct, when seeking out candidates. The Marines don’t have that problem. One must meet their standards, not vice versa. To be even considered for recruiting several requirements must be met, including, meeting exacting physical, mental and moral standards, have a high school diploma, pass an aptitude test, and pass a medical test. While some organizations require some aptitude testing, a degree of some kind, and possibly a medical examination, the Marines require every individual to go through, and meet, the exact same standards.

Once accepted, via a rigorous recruiting process, the next stop is boot camp. Yes, some companies have their form of “boot camp,” but it cannot pass muster when compared to what is ingrained into every single recruit in the Marine Corps, one that redefines the word memorable. In the corporate arena one finds themselves at a five star

hotel, with breakfast and refreshments served throughout the day, using cell phones, etc, between sessions, and go home to the comfort of their family each evening. They may sit quietly taking notes, decide to participate, or not, getting by with an “average” passing grade, not really caring how the person next to them did, or if they even passed. Marines take a somewhat different approach. Upon arriving at Marine Recruit Depot, the first thing heard is “Get off my bus ...NOW! - followed up by “Get your feet on the yellow footprints...NOW! Speech is in the future tense as in YOU WILL! And one does. There is no welcome to Camp Wanna Be. A new language is introduced immediately, which is steeped in tradition, but it is not understood. But it will be, and it will become the fabric of their being. In the corporate world someone is given tasks to complete during their evaluation period, which most teenagers could complete in their sleep. In Marine Corps boot camp recruits are given what seems like impossible tasks to complete, which can only be completed through teamwork. This embeds teamwork into their psyche. Teamwork is engrained so deeply that a Marine will never advance his position at the cost of another Marine. How many leaders in business today, while hooked up to a lie detector, can swear to that? In addition the culture of the Marine Corps, and its members, engulfs recruits at all times, constantly reinforced through example, and although it will be many weeks before they realize it, they are undergoing a transformation. The Marine Corps, not corporate America, causes a person, for the first time in their life, to face absolute and exacting standards of right and wrong, of success and failure. In the corporate world when someone screws up they may or may not be brought to task for it, they may blame someone else, make silly excuses, or simply have it ignored. In the Corps when a recruit screws up everyone and everything stops, they are penalized immediately, in a most uncomfortable, yet memorable way, so that mistake is not made a second time.

While some companies have standards, the Marine Corps has simple rules, which might seem too simple for corporations to bother training around. This is a failing on their part. Everything in the Marine Corps centers on simple things, like telling the truth, always doing your best, even the trivial tasks, choosing the difficult right over the easy wrong, not whining or making excuses, judging others by their actions, and most importantly, looking out for the team before looking out for one’s self. Can companies say they push their people beyond their limits, while at the same time having excellence become a habitual habit? Companies push their people beyond their limits, and then discard them, when they fail, having no further use for them. In the Marine Corps recruits are pushed beyond their limits to expand those limits, and are constantly told how special Marines are, leading to pride in oneself and their accomplishments. Through that they develop discipline, a can do attitude, and leadership capabilities.

Do companies engrain leadership capability into their people through core values? If someone reads the business section of the newspaper each day they know the answer is no. Core values cannot be engrained in an organization when the higher ups within the organization are publicly shamed for acts they have committed, or jump from one organization to another. When a “leader” leaves, so do any values he had until the next person arrives with a new set of values, good or bad, for everyone to live their business life by. The Marine Corps is a rigid code that defines ones character, staying with them where ever they go. These values are timeless and do not change with a change in personnel. To be a good leader a person must first be a good follower. In the Marine Corps every Marine is a follower of the next highest rank, obeying orders without question, until that time comes when a leadership void exists, stepping in to fill that void, and accomplish the mission at hand. In business when a leadership void occurs there most likely is no one prepared, or qualified, to step in, allowing the void to become a vacuum, causing disruption to the business. The Marine Corps refuses to be found in that situation, particularly when lives are at stake.

In addition companies do not have a defining moment when someone is selected to become part of the organization. A memorable moment etched in their mind, which they had to earn. During boot camp recruits are never, ever, referred to as a Marine. They will not hear themselves referred to as a Marine until graduation day, when an eagle, globe and anchor emblem is placed into their hand, by the person they respect most in the world, their drill instructor, who has modeled what makes a Marine for the last twelve weeks. Can it be said in business that those leading them are revered that much? Do the employees of Enron feel that way about their former leaders? How then can Marines have such reverence for their leaders? Because they will be standing at their side when shit hits the fan, and if necessary they will fight side by side with them to victory. Leadership is demonstrated, not assumed.

What causes employees of a company to stay together? Is it a pay check? There has to be more, and there is. The culture of the company, although usually unstated, holds people together. There is a culture that connects every Marine to every other Marine on the planet, they have a shared experience that tested them, and each passed it. In addition each of them, regardless of specialty, are each first a rifleman. But there is still more to being a Marine, and that is the shared experience of sacrifice and humility. Marines learn together, sweat together, fight together, and sometimes die together, but they never quit, on each other, or the mission. Economic conditions have no bearing on their heartfelt belief in *Semper Fidelis*, a Latin term meaning always faithful. Can corporate America say the same? Here is the bottom line: When catastrophe strikes, acknowledge it, bury your dead, let your team talk about the experience, and then pick up your weapons and get back into the fight. (Johnson & Harper 117) Catastrophe strikes every organization sooner or later. The important thing is to accept it, learn from it, and get back on track so the mission of the organization can be accomplished. Marines know how to do that, along with knowing how to help people pick themselves up and move on.

Leadership in business should be no different than in the Marine Corps, in almost every case, poor performance is the result of poor leadership. It is not about multimillion dollar salaries, stock options, golden parachutes, or lavish parties. It is also not about being tough as nails, capable of overcoming insurmountable odds, or taking no prisoners, but elements of each exist in every leader when required. Leadership in the Marine Corps is about inspiring people to be more than they ever thought possible, having leadership demonstrated at every opportunity, with humility and grace, by equally as tough Marines. It is demonstrated through judgment, justice and unselfishness. Does the company leader leave the coffee pot empty upon taking the last cup, expecting someone of lesser stature to refill it? If so they are not a leader, they believe they are royalty. Does the leader receive perks that others in the company do not? A Marine Corps officer is the last in the chow line, last to receive any creature comforts, insisting first his men, or women, be taken care of. He knows by taking care of his Marines, they will take care of business when it is most critical, with great personal sacrifice. It is what is referred to as discretionary effort, or, that effort which someone puts forth, but would not be punished if they did not. Discretionary effort is second nature for a Marine, put forth with no expectation of acknowledgment, or reward.

When was the last time a CEO of a large business spent time at the company's front lines, explaining what the mission of the company was, and how they fit into it with the work they perform daily? Fancy sayings hung on a wall at the corporate office don't do much good to the people furthest from the lap of luxury, where the only smell is that of marzipan, atop of Danish rolls, someone brought in to celebrate another "almost" accomplished mission. In the Corps, the mission of the organization is discussed at every level, and the lowest ranking Marine can tell you in 10 words or less what his role is in it. He probably knows because a three star General just got off a helicopter, bearing fresh meat and beer, telling him directly what was expected of him. And he didn't just get off the latest state-of-the-art helicopter or corporate jet; it was left over from the last war. For every Marine, leadership is a verb, not a noun, and failure to accomplish the mission is not an option, in peace or war.

And what about those mission statements? Most are so long winded you haven't a clue which direction to run in after reading them. Mission statements require a clear, concise statement that a second grade student can tell you exactly what it means. The Marines mission statement only contains five words – Making Marines and Winning Battles. Pretty simple and yet memorable, and herein lies the answer so many businesses cannot find the solution to. "Making Marines" isn't just a slogan. It is what they do, with a very well documented and thought out process by which from the moment a person's feet land on the yellow footprints at a Marine Recruit Depot, they are having demonstrated to them what leadership looks like, and are force fed it until 12 weeks later a true leader emerges. And the change lasts a lifetime. Marines internalize those things business needs today. Things like Courage, Honor and Commitment. It is about having the courage to do the right thing, at the right time, to the right degree, for the right reason. Their honor guides them to exemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior. Commitment is the unrelenting determination to accomplish a mission, and loyalty to the organization, and its people. They leave no one behind, on the battlefield, or in their leadership development. They lead by example, respect themselves and others, maintain a high level of integrity in every situation, upholding special trusts and confidences.

Businesses today require leaders who can answer the question – *do you have what it takes to inspire people to accomplish the strategic objectives of the organization?* – pushing that mentality down to the furthest reaches of

the organization. It requires leaders who have been instilled with things like dependability, decisiveness, endurance, initiative, unselfishness, and not the least of all, tact. These things cannot be taught from books. They require the presence of real leaders, the best an organization has to offer, to put people in situations where leadership can be developed. Leadership does not come from appointment, it comes from development. As stated by Oren Harari in his book, "The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell," "When managers ascend the corporate hierarchy, they sometimes become afflicted with a curious problem: Their ears get smaller and their mouths get larger." (50) Somehow as people get promoted they begin to think they know it all and stop listening to those around them, when in fact, those around them are the ones with the answers to the problems. Until business understands this, and take action to eliminate it, through leadership development, they will simply conduct business as usual, depriving themselves, and the organization, from its true potential.

Marines have codified the elements a leader in business today requires, best summed up in the Marine Corps Values, crystallized by Marines for 234 years, as outlined by Robert Aldelhelm in his article "*Honor, Courage, Commitment ...Is the change really for life...when it comes to the corps values?*"

*Honor* guides Marines to exemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior; to never lie, cheat or steal; to abide by an uncompromising code of integrity; respect human dignity; and respect others. The quality of maturity, dedication, trust and dependability commit Marines to act responsibly; to be accountable for their actions; to fulfill their obligations; and to hold others accountable for their actions.

*Courage* is the mental, moral and physical strength ingrained in Marines. It carries them through the challenges of combat and helps them overcome fear. It is the inner strength that enables a Marine to do what is right; to adhere to a higher standard of personal conduct; and to make tough decisions under stress and pressure.

*Commitment* is the spirit of determination and dedication found in Marines. It leads to the highest order of discipline for individuals and units. It is the ingredient that enables 24-hour a day dedication to Corps and country. It inspires the unrelenting determination to achieve a standard of excellence in every endeavor. (1)

Honor is the bedrock of a Marine's character, and they know that being a Marine is not about salaries, stock options, or perks; it's about the spirit of being a Marine. Their courage comes from living their honor. Courage is not always centered on combat; instead, it is doing the right thing, when everyone around you is afraid to. And commitment is the inner drive to accomplish whatever needs to be accomplished, leaving no one behind.

In conclusion, Marines make good leaders because they come from an organization which not only teaches leadership, but requires its use daily. Marines are taught how to lead people and realize that it's not about the widget being produced; it's about the people who make the widget that makes an organization great. Would it not be said that leaders today in business, who possessed such training and values, were superior to those who have not had it engrained into the very core of their being? Assuming the technical requirements are met, men and women, who possess such values, not only possess, but live these values, would make outstanding leaders in any organization, and a leader others would be inspired to follow. And if there is one guarantee a Marine can give you, it is they will never, ever, tell you to "get three envelopes and label them one, two, and three."

#### Works Cited

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