In the beginning, standing between independence and the superpower of the day, we were an Army of citizen soldiers in desperate need of professional leadership, discipline and training. Today, we’re the world’s best trained, most powerful and professionally led Army. We owe our strength to a willingness to change when necessary and the good sense to understand and leave alone the enduring things that must never change. Ours has been a dramatic evolution from a collection of citizen soldier militia units to the force of Desert Storm.

While you think of that evolution, consider this: Of all the changes that have kept us powerful, one thing has never and can never change if we are to remain so: the on-the-ground leadership embraced by von Steuben’s expectations and carried out daily by NCO leaders.

This article discusses how NCO leaders must internalize von Steuben’s expectations and serve as a model for soldiers and how to care for soldiers in the three-meter zone.

Setting the Example

- The choice of non-commissioned officers is an object of the greatest importance... The most important leading that goes on in the Army is that which occurs closest to soldiers—in the three-meter zone. Soldiers are molded, good and bad, by the leadership events that happen within three meters of them. NCO leadership easily is the most important level of leadership to our Army. The expectations for NCO leaders today remain virtually unchanged since von Steuben penned them in 1779.
- ...too much care cannot be taken in preferring none to that trust... The first leader a soldier meets in the process of becoming a soldier is an NCO. The soldier-NCO relationship begins immediately. We model standards, maintain discipline, train and care for soldiers, provide them with answers and lead them. NCO leaders must understand the influence we have on the Army because of our close relationships with soldiers.

Consciously or not, we lead by example. Soldiers learn how to lead and take care of soldiers by copying the model provided by their three-meter zone NCO. The enduring nature of our trade requires us to focus on the things that make good leaders.

- ...those who by their merit and good conduct....Honesty, sobriety... We must...
internalize and live values. It’s nice that we’ve fashioned values reminders to hang around our necks. The values “credit card” for our wallets is nice too. But those things are just reminders. Soldiers do not learn values from a list on a tag or credit card; they learn the values of their NCO.

It’s easy to memorize the book definitions of our seven core values—loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage. The same can be said about the personal values of candor, courage, compassion, commitment and competence. The difficult task is internalizing what each value means and understanding how our soldiers learn them from us. Our values are the Army’s foundation; they endure. Our soldiers learn them from us—NCO leaders.

•...an expertness in performing every part of the exercise... We must master leadership competencies. We all have the challenge of completing a soul-searching, honest self-assessment of our knowledge, skills and abilities.

Everything important to an NCO leader’s proficiency is found in FM 22-100 Military Leadership; communications, supervision, teaching and counseling, soldier-team development, technical and tactical proficiency, decision making, planning, use of available systems and professional ethics. Whether we’re a high-tech, low-tech or no-tech army, these competencies endure.

•...a spirit to command respect... To lead soldiers, we must gain their trust and confidence. We gain their trust and confidence by showing them we’re worthy of it—consistently living values and demonstrating character and proficiency by mastering the leadership competencies. Then soldiers will give us the ability to lead them.

•...a remarkable attention to every point of duty, with a neatness in their dress... We are the standard. Select a subject, anything from physical fitness to equipment maintenance to wear of the uniform, and you can find published standards for it. The subject is not important. What’s important is that soldiers do not go to a book to look up a standard for something. Instead, they look to their closest NCO leader for the standard.

We are watched every minute of every day whether at the shoppette or on the firing line. Soldiers observe us and copy us because we model the standard. Every NCO’s three-meter zone is a mirror image of the standard he models.

• The order and discipline of a regiment depends so much upon their behaviour... We create the environment for discipline. Discipline comes from self-discipline. NCO leaders with good self-discipline habits build well-disciplined soldiers and units.

We must enforce published rules, regulations and what we know to be moral and legal. Selectively choosing to disobey or disregard a regulation or standard, no matter how insignificant it seems at the time, is not acceptable. If we make that choice, we demonstrate poor self-discipline and raise soldiers, future leaders and units with poor discipline habits.

We must have purpose and direction. All good leaders know where they’re going and when they get there. They have personal priorities based on their knowledge of our Army, past and present. They use that knowledge to establish the right direction for themselves and their soldiers. NCO leaders apply “personal battle focus” to their lives.

•...nor can a sergeant or corporal be said to be qualified who does not write and read in a tolerable manner. We have to model for soldiers a system of self-assessment that tells us where we are in our professional and personal lives. From those assessments, we develop a plan to get where we want and need to be. We execute our plan, re-ess and then make another plan. Much like the battle-focused training management cycle, we model for soldiers a personal continuous improvement system—personal battle focus.

These are just some of the enduring traits NCO leaders must have to grow soldiers into good three-meter zone leaders, but that’s just half the story. Not only must we show them how we work to make ourselves better leaders, we also must show them how to take care of soldiers. They learn that from us too.

Caring for Soldiers

• Know your soldiers. It’s important to understand what knowing soldiers means. Often we model that capturing as much information about a person as possible and recording it in our leader’s notebook equals knowing them. There is much more to knowing a soldier than recording his or her weapon zero, PT score and last counseling date in a notebook.

What’s just as important is to know things like the environment your soldier comes from. Was it a farm? The inner city? Large family? Only child? This information gives you insight into the person and is more important than knowing his stats.

Knowing where a soldier comes from may help you understand why the soldier acts or reacts in a certain manner. A soldier from a large family, for example, may not need much privacy and will readily adapt to a group, whereas the opposite may be true for an only child. This insight also may help you understand the soldier’s perceptions about you and the business of being a soldier—perceptions you may have to counter by demonstrating that no one is more professional. Make sure that the
knowledge you have of your soldiers extends beyond the stats in your leader’s notebook.

- Respect soldiers. My son standing in front of me as a brand new Army private caused my view of soldiers to take on a different hue. Every private is the son or daughter of someone. We have to treat them with the same dignity and respect as we treat our own sons and daughters. That does not imply that we relax a standard or are less firm when building discipline. It means if we train hard, enforce standards and build discipline we give that son or daughter the best possible chance to survive.

Treating soldiers with dignity and respect does not equal softening the environment. What’s important and enduring is that the private you mold by example today is the NCO leader who will be taking care of your son or daughter tomorrow.

- Motivate soldiers—have the ...spirit to command...obedience... How do we motivate soldiers? We often model for soldiers that motivation is directly related to the muscles used for push-ups. So naturally, the more we exercise those muscles for our soldiers, the more motivated we believe they will be. I could easily break into a sermon here about what motivation is or isn’t, but I won’t do that. Just trust me when I tell you it has little to do with push-ups.

Caring leaders who are positive role models and out-front leaders motivate soldiers. Motivating leaders understand the importance of sharing the difficult times with their soldiers. Sergeant Major John G. Stepanek captured the spirit of motivating soldiers in a speech to officer basic students (OBC) at their graduation that was printed in Army Digest, August 1967: “As a Senior NCO Sees It!” (Pages 5 and 6). In his speech to the young officers, Sergeant Major Stepanek said,

> From most of us, you can expect... courage to match your courage, guts to match your guts, endurance to match your endurance, motivation to match your motivation, esprit to match your esprit, a desire for achievement to match your desire for achievement. You can expect a love of God, a love of country and a love of duty to match your love of God, your love of country and your love of duty. We won’t mind the heat if you sweat with us, and we won’t mind the cold if you shiver with us.

- Train soldiers...[have an ability to teach... NCOs are the Army’s principal trainers charged with its most important aspect—individual training. Individual training is the foundation for everything in the Army. No commander can complete a mission, training or real, without soldiers well-trained in individual skills.

Sometimes, for different reasons, we lose sight of that critical element of soldier care. We must be intimately familiar with our role in training and understand our battle-focused training system. And remember this: How you teach and train your soldiers to keep them current in their jobs and basic soldier survival skills is how they will do it when they replace you.

Every NCO leader leaves a legacy, good or bad, with the piece of the Army he leads. Never forget the enduring nature of our business. If you have led a team, squad, platoon or any sized element in the Army, you have influenced many. Each member of that element has transferred some of your characteristics, good or bad, to another squad or platoon. By the nature of what we do, each of us stands to influence hundreds and maybe, if we stick around long enough, even thousands—a staggering thought isn’t it? As you ponder the ramifications of your legacy, I’ll leave you with one more enduring aspect of leadership to mull over: Chickenship.

I heard a story once. It was about a couple of neighbors. They were old retired folks living alone. One was an old man, the other an old woman. Both had the most beautiful roses you could imagine. No matter how hard the old woman worked at her roses, they were never as good as his. She tried very hard to find out what he was doing differently than she, but never could.

One day out of frustration, she finally asked the old gentleman his secret. He walked into his garden shack and came back with a bucket. “Here’s what I use,” he said, as he passed her a bucket full of chicken droppings.

The old lady was surprised that he’d shared his secret with her. She was determined to have roses as good as his. Every couple of days, she went out and put a generous helping of the droppings on her roses. Soon, however, her roses began to droop over and die. Right away she accused the old man of lying to her. She told him she’d been putting the droppings on every couple of days and now, thanks to him, her roses were dead.

“There’s your problem,” said the old man, “you’ve used too much. Too much will cause them to quit growing, might even kill ’em. You just apply a little bit at the right time, and they’ll do fine.”

Leadership is a lot like fertilizing roses. The right amount and type applied at the right time will get the job done. It will have a nurturing affect and allow those you are leading the opportunity to grow. But be careful about the amount you use. Because, “too much will cause them to quit growing, might even kill ‘em.”

Don’t turn your leadership into chickenship.

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