

# **The Essentials of Leadership**

by

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Change is frightening. In this age of downsizing, reorganization, moving units, base closures, frequent deployments, outsourcing and privatization, change is everywhere. Such major changes to the way we've always done business in the Air Force have left many people feeling disoriented and lost.

Major transitions unleash powerful conflicting forces in people. The change invokes simultaneous positive and negative personal feelings of fear and hope, anxiety and relief, pressure and stimulation, leaving the old and accepting a new direction, loss of meaning and new meaning, threat to self-esteem and new sense of value. (Tichy and Ulrich, 1989, 351)

Leading people through such major changes is a difficult task—it calls for leaders with courage and conviction, leaders with the ability to "develop a vision of what can be, to mobilize the organization to accept and work toward the new vision, and to institutionalize the changes that must last over time." (Tichy and Ulrich, 1989, 344)

In times like these, it is appropriate to take a few moments to look again at leadership and what it takes to lead in tough times. Unfortunately, scholars who have studied leadership have produced a range of conflicting theories. The fashion in the early part of this century was "trait theory"—which alleged that certain personality or physical traits were what made people into leaders. "Trait theory" was followed by theories that focused on situational aspects, follower development, leader-follower interaction, and a host of others. (Bass, 1981) Leadership theory can now be summarized as: "leader characteristics and situational demands interact to determine the extent to which a given leader will provide successful in a group." (Bass, 1981, 585) In other words, there is no single all-purpose leadership style which is universally successful. (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969, 27)

Instead of conflicting theories, what we need is something simple—a "Ten Commandments" for leadership. And so, with all due respect to the Lord, here is my proposal for "A Leader's Ten Commandments:"

## **THE LEADER'S TEN COMMANDMENTS**

- I. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- II. Thou shalt be consistent.
- III. Thou shalt get out of thy office regularly.

- IV. Thou shalt avoid snap decisions.
- V. Thou shalt make time for thy people.
- VI. Thou shalt take the time to listen.
- VII. Thou shalt always be in control of thyself.
- VIII. Thou shalt communicate clearly with thy subordinates.
- IX. Thou shalt take responsibility for thy actions.
- X. Thou shalt LEAD thy people.

The first commandment, to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us" should require no explanation. And yet, how many supervisors forget to say "good morning" to their subordinates? How many leaders chair meetings that lack purpose and structure, wasting everyone's time? How many supervisors gossip about their bosses and peers? How many leaders forget to praise in public, reprimand in private? How many leaders "chop the heads off" messengers with bad news?

What difference does it make? Treating people with respect, dignity and concern improves performance and morale. In one field study of seven different organizations, the results proved that highly productive employees consistently had supervisors who treated them as people, not as tools to get the job done. (Katz and Kahn, 1989, 290) Good interpersonal relationships between leaders and those they lead improves productivity (Nathan, Mohrman and Milliman, 1991) and unit morale (Katz and Kahn, 1989).

Here's a simple suggestion we can all follow that will help us be more effective in "doing unto others." Take a piece of paper and write down all the habits your boss has that drive you crazy. Now, put a checkmark by all those habits you have yourself (BE HONEST!). Unfortunately, you will probably find that you, too, are guilty of treating your subordinates in a way you personally dislike. Research shows that we all tend to copy our supervisor's leadership style (Katz and Kahn, 1989, 288). Which means your subordinates who are also supervisors are busy copying you—including any bad habits you may have!

Breaking bad habits is not easy. The crucial first step to correcting our behavior is self-awareness. The simple exercise described above should help us all be more aware of how we treat others. Such self-awareness helps us focus on our counterproductive habits—and change them for the better.

After "doing unto others," the next important leadership commandment is "Thou shalt be consistent." Consistency breeds trust. In experimental research involving "prisoner's dilemma," subjects were more likely to respond to guidance from sources whose behavior and communication were clear and consistent. Why? Because they felt the source was more

trustworthy. (Hogan, et al, 1974, 1080-81) Subordinates react to supervisory behavior and communication based upon consistency between what the supervisor *says*, and what the supervisor *does*. (Likert, 1976, 94-59).

People will change their behavior in response to feedback from their leadership, but only if they believe leadership is credible. A leader's credibility rests on how on how much followers trust him or her. (Hovland, 1953, 20-22) Is what you *say* and what you *do* consistent? If you're not sure, ask yourself what sort of behavior do you reward? Punish? And then ask yourself, is that REALLY what I want to reward and/or punish? Are people guilty of similar offenses given similar punishments? If you say that something's important, do you actually allocate resources (money, time, manpower) to it?

Speaking of resources, how are you spending your time? The third commandment, "Thou shalt get out of thy office regularly" speaks to the importance of spending time out actually seeing what is happening in your organization. How do you know what is happening if you never go look? When I was a squadron commander, I would block time to do nothing but visit duty sections. Unfortunately, there are plenty of leaders who think that because they get a metrics briefing once a week, religiously check their e-mail, and read everything in their in-basket they know "what's happening" in their organization. Metrics and paperwork are important, but they do not tell the whole story.

Secretaries often unwittingly compound the problem by obligingly scheduling their bosses for days of wall-to-wall meetings. So who's in charge of your life? Your secretary? Your calendar? Ok, there are lots of meetings we all have to attend. But force yourself to block time on that calendar to work out, think, and get out and see what's happening in your unit. It makes a big difference!

How you allocate your time sends powerful messages to the people you lead about what you think is important. (Sergiovanni, 1989, 339) If you spend your time doing paperwork, the message you convey to your followers is simple: My paperwork is more important than you are. No wonder researchers found that supervisors who spent their time on their paperwork had lower-producing work sections than those with supervisors who spent more of their time actually training, communicating and leading their subordinates. (Katz and Kahn, 1989, 287-9)

We all have our faults, and the next commandment goes straight to the heart of mine—"Thou shalt avoid snap decisions." Like most officers, I am determined to be decisive, and somewhere I confuse "being decisive" with "making rapid decisions." The two are not the same. Certainly, there are times when rapid decisions must be made; however, those occasions are far fewer than we think. Luckily, I had a good first sergeant to teach me that "sleeping on it" is the best way to approach major decisions—especially when they can change people's lives.

We are most prone to making snap decisions when something has gone wrong. How we deal with mistakes, error, and failure communicate powerful messages to those we lead. (Follett, 1989, 264) If we react in a way that leads our people to lose faith in us, we end up with followers who do not listen and reluctant to communicate any "bad news" to us. (Lee, 1989, 97) As leaders, we rely on information to make decisions. If our subordinates are afraid to tell us bad

news or disagree with us, we can make poorly-informed decisions which lead to disaster. Taking a deep breath, sleeping on it, slowing down for just a moment before reacting with an immediate decision, can help us create an organizational climate where followers feel they can trust us to make the right choices.

Another way we can foster trust, mission accomplishment and morale is by following the fifth commandment, "thou shalt make time for thy people." As mentioned previously, how leaders use their time communicates powerful messages to followers. (Sergiovanni, 1989, 339) Spending time leading, tending to the interpersonal aspects of leadership, training our people, giving them feedback on their performance, mentoring them, expressing concern about them and their off-duty problems are all related to high morale and productivity. (Katz and Kahn, 1989, Nathan, Mohrman and Milliman, 1991, Meyer, French and Kay, 1965, Pavett, 1983, Kim and Hamner, 1976)

We often hear the words "people are our most important assets" or "take care of the people and they'll take care of the mission." But how much time do we actually spend taking care of the people? Do we take the time to write quality performance reports? Do we nominate our people for the awards and recognition they deserve? Do we take the time to visit duty sections? Do we remember to follow up and find out if Airman Jones' mother recovered from her near-fatal car wreck? Do we take the time to learn people's names? To go back to what was said earlier about consistency, followers judge how much their leaders care by what their leaders *do*. Making time for those who work for you is the most powerful way to convey to them how much you care.

A closely related idea involves listening. "Thou shalt take the time to listen" is the sixth leadership commandment, and a very powerful one. Taking the time to listen to the needs and concerns of followers has a major impact on their morale, productivity, and their perceptions of you as a leader. (Sergiovanni, 1989, Katz and Kahn, 1989) Listening is a skill that has routinely been overlooked. Instead of listening, we think about the person communicating with us, try to think ahead and anticipate their argument, or find solutions to their problems. (T&Q, 1992, 105-107) As a result, leaders frequently miss out on good ideas, problems and opportunities.

To improve your listening skills, try applying some of these suggestions. Make eye contact with the speaker; eye contact reassures them that you care about what they have to say. Try to tune out your ideas. Listen to the concept—the idea—behind what the person is trying to say; some people have trouble expressing their ideas. Listen to understand—not to refute or question. Take notes—listeners will be flattered if you take a few; however, if you're always taking notes, they're apt to think you're not listening. Keep your feelings positive; try to control any negative feelings you may have about the speaker. And credit the source when you're passing on someone else's good ideas. (T&Q, 1992, 107-108) Listening takes time—but it's time well-spent!

The past few commandments have focused on others, this next commandment focuses attention squarely on the leader—"thou shalt always be in control of thyself." It's commonly said that if we can't control ourselves, we can't control others. Leaders who indulge in temper tantrums, tirades, shouting matches, and abusive language damage their relationships with subordinates, and as a result, damage unit morale and productivity. (Katz and Kahn, 1988, Hersey and

Blanchard, 1969, Sergiovanni, 1988, Nathan, Mohrman and Milliman, 1991, Lee, 1989) ‘Nuff said!

A better, more productive way to get your views across is to focus on clear communication—the subject of the next commandment—"thou shalt communicate clearly with thy subordinates." How many times have we seen communication get garbled—and work done incorrectly or not at all as a result? Taking a few minutes to provide clear direction, goals and feedback pays off. Researchers have repeatedly shown a connection between clear communication and improved performance. (Meyer, French and Kay, 1965, Kim and Hamner, 1976, Pavett, 1983) Furthermore, subordinates who understand what the goal is are better able to adapt tactics to fit the situation—and meet objectives. Keeping communication channels open and functioning is a key skill every leader must have to be effective. (McGregor, 1960, 277)

There are several things leaders can do to improve communication. First, know what you want. You can't give others clear direction if you're not sure yourself about what the goals should be. Second, pay attention to the subordinate—make eye contact to see if they look puzzled or confused. Third, use plain English (not bureaucratic obfuscation) to communicate. Finally, it takes only a few seconds to check for understanding by asking if your listener understands what you want. (T&Q, 1992, 1-6)

After communicating what you want done, you have a ninth obligation—"thou shalt take responsibility for thy actions." If you order something done, take the hit for it if something goes wrong. Accepting responsibility for decisions and actions taken is a crucial leadership skill. (McGregor, 1960, 277) Remember the old adage that you can "delegate authority, but not responsibility." If you delegate a task, you're still accountable for the results—so take the hit if things go wrong, and give your subordinates the credit when things go right. After all, nothing breaks the bond of trust between leader and followers any faster than to have the leader "nowhere to be found" when the going gets tough. Remember, trust is at the heart of the relationship between leader and follower.

Assuming you've mastered the previous nine commandments, the last one—"thou shalt earn the respect of thy subordinates"—should be automatic. Treat people with respect and dignity, listen to what they say, be consistent, exhibit self-control, communicate clearly, and take responsibility for your decisions sum up the Leader's Ten Commandments; adhering to them ensures a leader earns the respect of followers—and doesn't waste time demanding respect. "What the leader stands for and believes . . . comprise the guiding principles which bring integrity and meaning to leadership. Leaders stand for certain ideals and principles which become the cornerstones of their very being." (Sergiovanni, 336-7)

Leadership is a challenge—especially during periods of rapid change. Successful leadership calls for leaders who can recognize the mixed emotions people experience as a result of change, and can act to mobilize and focus people's energy on the positive features of change and the actions needed to make change successful. The Leader's Ten Commandments are the essential skills every leader needs. The rapid and intense change the Air Force is undergoing mean those basic skills are more urgently needed than ever. The Air Force as an institution will survive. Whether it

continues to thrive depends on its leaders. It's up to us to stop focusing on how things "used to be," seize the challenge of leadership and move the Air Force forward to the next century.

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