Military Leadership Traits

P U R P O S E

This lesson explains and provides examples of the fourteen military leadership traits used in the Marine Corps.

Introduction

Many traits allow you to become a good leader. The list is probably endless. The following fourteen military leadership traits will help you to be a good leader in the Success Academy.

Your personal development of these traits will take time and effort. First, evaluate yourself and see what traits you have or want to develop. Then, determine what you need to do to improve the traits you have or will develop. Ask yourself, am I living up to the standards of a leader? Ask yourself, “Would I be willing to follow the same kind of person that I am?”

1. Bearing

You should always attempt to create a favorable impression by your appearance. You should carry yourself well, and always act in a manner becoming to an officer.

This means that you should always look, act, and speak like a leader -- whether you feel like it or not. There will be times when you will wish that someone else could take the responsibility for a while. To feel this is one thing; to let it show in your actions and appearance is quite another. If people see that you are discouraged, then they, too, will be discouraged. Remember, you lead by example and to hang your head, to be out of uniform, or to speak in pessimistic tones implies a sense of fear and a lack of desire. Your job is to lead; where you lead, is up to you. If you have a positive attitude, so will your team members. Your appearance and carriage will express your attitude and feelings.

There are many examples of bearing in American history. An outstanding example is George Washington, whose great bearing and stature were displayed at Valley Forge and at Trenton. Robert E. Lee showed, in his attitude and appearance at Appomattox, that he was an officer and a gentleman. Nathan Hale exhibited great bearing and courage at the makeshift gallows that took his life. Of course, you may never be asked to exhibit your own bearing and courage to this degree, but you must understand the significance of this trait.

2. Courage

The courage that allows one to perform effectively, in spite of hardships, takes many forms. Courage is the mental quality that allows you to face fear and to overcome it. This means both the fear of physical harm and the fear of criticism.

Courage is a quality or trait that all people must have in order to face danger. The courage of men in the Marine Corps like Smedly Butler, Dan Daly, and “Chesty” Puller are examples to us all. These men showed us how to lead during difficult times. They did so with little regard for their own welfare and with nearly complete disregard for the possibility of physical harm. They showed great physical and moral courage. Their moral courage was shown in the fact that they could not have faced danger in the manner that they did, unless they believed in what they were doing. They had
the courage to stand up for their beliefs and to do their duty as required by the situation.

You must also have the courage to stand up for your beliefs. You might not ever be asked to exhibit the physical courage of the men mentioned above; however, you will be asked to exhibit courage in defending your ethics and values. To do the right thing in the face of adversity and opposition is not easy. One of your friends may ask you to do something unethical. It will be up to you to do what is right.

A good example of this kind of courage can be found in the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Gerald Ford. Abraham Lincoln had to take drastic actions to keep the Union intact. He stretched his powers to the limit. He even went beyond the legal limits set by the Constitution. This took great courage and heart, but Lincoln knew that the Union had to be preserved, so he did what he had to do. Consequently, he paid for it with his life.

Gerald Ford was asked to show the same kind of courage, although to a lesser degree. Ford came into office in one of the worst situations in the history of the presidency. Former President Nixon had left the presidential office in disgrace and the faith of the public in our system of justice and government was shaken. The populace was divided concerning how to deal with the actions of the former president. President Ford was faced with the difficult decision of whether to prosecute or pardon former President Nixon. He knew the consequences. He knew that the pardon was a move that could cost him his political career. He also knew that the country would be divided if the former president were prosecuted. Finally, he mustered the courage to do what was necessary and issued the pardon.

3. Decisiveness

Decisiveness is a quality that allows an individual to take swift and firm action. To be able to make such decisions, and take such actions, you must also be informed of all available facts. A person must also be courageous to be decisive. The decisions you make will not always be popular.

Those same decisions of Lincoln and Ford also provide excellent examples of decisiveness. President Lincoln realized that some of his decisions would be unpopular but that in order to save the Union he would have to act quickly and decisively. If he had waited to take a stand, the South might have had time to establish control over the seas. It would have set up defenses, solidified its own system of government, and united its military. For this reason, Lincoln acted quickly. If he had not, the war might have lasted longer than four years.

President Ford understood the unfortunate situation concerning Richard Nixon when he came into office. He realized that if something was not done right away, the situation would worsen. As we saw earlier, the country was
split on the question of how the former president should be treated. Ford acted quickly and decisively and granted former President Nixon a full pardon.

When you are making a decision, you must always remember that you should get all the available information within the constraints of time. When this is done, you must act as quickly as the situation requires. You must be firm in your actions and confident in your decisions.

4. Dependability

Being dependable means other people will know that you will perform your duties in a proper manner. In the eyes of your superiors, this is a quality or trait that is of the utmost importance.

If your superiors give you a mission to accomplish, they want to be sure that it will be completed. Your team members will be depending on you to lead them in a manner that will allow them the most safety under the given conditions. You will have to be able to follow orders. You will have to instill in your unit the same attitude.

President Harry S. Truman demanded dependability from his subordinates. He was not a man who was willing to put up with anything less. He needed to be sure that when he gave an order, it would be followed to the letter. It was for this reason that Gen. Douglas MacArthur was relieved of command in 1951. MacArthur went beyond his orders by trying to dictate foreign policy to the President. He could no longer be depended upon to carry out the mission his country had set for his forces.

You must accomplish your tasks according to your orders. Civil and military laws require that you follow your orders and that you accept that no one is above the law. Douglas MacArthur was a five-star general, but he could not be depended upon politically and for this reason he was relieved of his command in Korea (1951). This is the worst of all possible fates for an officer, who is expected to serve the country according to the nation's standards, not the officer's own.

You will find that if you follow your orders and accomplish your tasks, you will always have the trust and respect of your superiors, your peers, and your followers. Trust and respect for a leader are of great importance. Would you want to follow a person whom you did not trust and respect?

5. Endurance

Endurance is the ability to endure hardships. These hardships might include hunger, cold, heat, and excessive stress.

Physical and mental endurance and toughness are necessary for all cadets. This trait, like those that have been discussed above, will serve you well in many situations. Endurance helps one to deal with hardships. No one enjoys uncomfortable or stressful situations, but they can
be endured if you develop a sense of pride in your work.

When you have to work long hours with little rest, you will need to be able to endure both physically and mentally. You will need to maintain a positive attitude and be physically fit to accomplish your task.

This trait of endurance is not new to the Marine Corps, since Marines have been enduring hardships throughout their history. They have been away from their families, they have been in constant danger, and they have had to fight for their lives. Sometimes, the Corps itself has had to fight for its very existence as the politicians tried to dismantle it. To endure and to overcome is the essence of the Corps. To endure in order to accomplish one's mission is the duty of every Marine.

Marines have endured from the “Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli,” from Iwo Jima to the Chosin Reservoir. Marines have always managed to accomplish their mission. Although you as a cadet may not face the rigors of a Marine, endurance can nevertheless be of great value. It can help you in both the Success Academy competitions and in school activities.

6. Enthusiasm

In order to be enthusiastic, you must show interest and exuberance in the performance of your duties. It is necessary that you remain optimistic and, if possible, cheerful. Remember, a positive attitude is a necessity if you are to make any progress in this attempt to acquire the traits that will allow you to become an effective leader. You must always keep your bearing. Keep your head up, and maintain your appearance so that your team members can see that you have kept up your level of enthusiasm.

The reason for the maintenance of this attitude is the fact that you must set an example for your team members. If they see that their leader is despondent and distraught, then they will be also. Even in the face of overwhelming odds, you must remain optimistic. Many examples of this are found in the history of military conflicts.

When surrounded by the advancing German army at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe was asked by the enemy for his surrender. He replied, “Nuts.” His answer inspired his men to fight and turn the tide in one of the last great battles of the war.

Marines have endured from the “Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli,” from Iwo Jima to the Chosin Reservoir. Marines have always managed to accomplish their mission. Although you as a cadet may not face the rigors of a Marine, endurance can nevertheless be of great value. It can help you in both the Success Academy competitions and in school activities.

At Chosin Reservoir in Korea, the First Division was surrounded by eight Chinese divisions at the same time. Yet, Col. Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller said: “We’ve got them right where we want them. They won’t get away this time.” Puller’s First Division defeated all eight divisions during their breakout and march to the sea.

You may or may not be involved in such a situation, but you must keep your enthusiasm on a daily basis, regardless. If you have an after-school job, are on an athletic team, or are a member of a school club, you must remain enthusiastic. Your enthusiasm is important in your
studies and in your devotion to your Success Academy unit and your school.

7. Initiative

Initiative is the ability, or presence of mind, to take action in the absence of any clearly defined orders. It means doing something on your own, not just when you are ordered. You must go the extra mile.

It will often be necessary for you to work with little or no supervision. During these times, you will have to make decisions concerning how the work is to be done. If your commanding officer tells you to accomplish a task, but does not tell you how to do it, you must take the initiative and develop your own plan of action.

There may be other situations that also call for initiative. For example, a Marine in a combat situation, isolated from his own line or having lost his commanding officer, may have to lead. He has to take the initiative. This is something that has happened in virtually every conflict in which the U.S. Marine Corps has been involved.

As a cadet, your leader may not always be present, thus forcing you to take initiative. Initiative means having the ability to see what has to be done and doing it. You should not have to be told everything, so if something needs to be done, do it. Enthusiasm has a great deal to do with initiative. The exuberance that you show in doing your job will often lead to going beyond your orders and going the extra distance.

Initiative also sets a fine example for your team members. It shows that you have the enthusiasm, the decisiveness, and the dependability to get the job done. Remember, part of your job is to train others to lead and to take on greater responsibilities. With the exception of the accomplishment of the mission, this is your greatest responsibility and you should take it very seriously.

8. Integrity

Integrity means that in order to lead, you must be honest and upright; you must be truthful in your actions and words. If you are anything less, your team members, your peers, or your superiors will not be able to trust you.

Trust is essential in any leadership situation, for if your team members cannot trust you, they will not follow you. You must also have the trust of your peers. If you cannot be trusted, you should not be leading.

In order to maintain your integrity, you must adhere to your code of ethics. Your code of ethics guides you to do the correct and moral thing, consistent with the highest values of your society as a whole. This is not always easy. There will be times when you will be tempted to act in a manner that will threaten your integrity. In times such as these, you must ask yourself whether or not you are doing the right thing. If you behave in an unethical manner, your team members will come to distrust you.

You might be asked to lie, cheat, or engage in illegal activities. Some of the things that might seem to be meaningless may well turn out to be very important. You never know how many people are depending on you. If you always do the right thing, then you will have nothing to worry about.

9. Judgment

Judgment is the ability to consider all of the factors of a problem or situation. It is then up to the leader to make a correct decision. Good judgment is important for a leader. Your judgment is what will keep your unit running smoothly.
If you show good judgment, it will give your team members faith in your abilities. This in turn will earn their respect and their loyalty.

Quality judgment is not something that comes easily, or naturally, to most people. It is something that must be nurtured and developed. You must take all aspects of a situation into consideration before making a judgment or decision. Without proper knowledge, a judgment cannot be made.

Good judgment is interrelated with most other leadership traits and cannot stand alone. You must use your knowledge, your decisiveness, and your courage in your judgments. You must examine a situation before you can make a decision concerning it.

Your judgment will tell you when to act, how to act, and where to act. It will have to be developed through experience. Learn from what you see and hear and you will develop good judgment.

10. Justice

Judgment will assist you in seeing that justice is done. Nearly all decisions that you make can be made solely based on merit, but first you must examine the evidence, or information, to see what does, and does not, pertain to the situation at hand. You must be fair and even in your decisions, and impartiality should be your watchword. Favoritism should never be a factor in the equation.

Justice, like most other leadership traits, will help you to earn the respect of your team members, peers, and superiors. If your team members see that they are treated fairly, they will trust your judgment. Justice will also help you to enforce discipline, because when people see that the rules have been clearly defined and consistently enforced, they will be inclined to follow them.

11. Knowledge

Knowledge consists of both technical and tactical knowledge as well as the knowledge of human nature. It will be necessary for you to keep up with the latest developments in military science and with what is going on in the world as a whole. In order to lead, you must know where you are going and how you are going to get there.

Technical and tactical knowledge will help you accomplish your task, regardless of what that task may be. To develop this knowledge, you will need to become familiar with equipment and the capabilities of the individuals assigned to your unit. You must also be in tune with the individual’s emotional states and attitudes. This will help you to recognize and eliminate problems before they get out of hand.

In some historical cases, knowledge of the habits and capabilities of the enemy was essential. This allowed for a fairly accurate prediction of activities and movements. An example of this is from the Revolutionary War. Washington knew that the Hessian troops at Trenton would be celebrating their holiday and would not suspect an attack from the Continental Army. He took them completely by surprise. This gave his men a victory and renewed confidence. It also strengthened the spirit of the American people in their fight for freedom and liberty.

Leaders should develop a program that keeps them abreast of current developments in their specialty (or field), organizational policies, and local and world communities. Technical publications, directives, books from recommended reading lists, magazines, newspapers, and periodicals are valuable aids toward achieving this goal. Serious group
discussions, research, professional development/leadership seminars, and experience also contribute to broadening a leader’s knowledge.

12. Loyalty

Loyalty is the quality of faithfulness to the country, one’s organization (such as the U.S. Marine Corps), seniors, subordinates, and peers. The confidence and respect that leaders can gain from superiors and team members is immeasurable. Conversely, the damage resulting from a lack of loyalty is also immeasurable. For example, although a leader’s reputation can spread everywhere if it is based on actions to protect subordinates from injustice, a breach in confidentiality will cause subordinates to lose respect in that leader.

A good leader does not allow personal opinion to interfere with the mission, nor give the impression of disagreement with orders when relaying them to subordinates. View orders as a superior’s method of dealing with a situation and support him or her wholeheartedly.

The necessity for loyalty in the unit is beyond question. You must be dedicated to the ideals of the unit. In order to be successful in this, you must also be loyal to subordinates, peers, and superiors. Loyalty is the essence of serving your unit.

Loyalty takes form in many actions that may be required of you. Sometimes you will be asked to follow orders that seem to make little sense, but you must follow them anyway. There are many examples of this kind of loyalty and dedication in the history of the Corps. Marines captured in various conflicts have remained loyal and have thought only of their country and of escape. This is the kind of selfless dedication and loyalty that is required of a leader.

13. Tact

Tact is the ability to deal with others without creating offense. To treat others with courtesy is a sign of maturity and it requires you to be tactful in your dealings with your peers, subordinates, and superiors.

Being tactful and diplomatic in your communications should come as naturally as possible. You should speak to others without being demeaning or condescending. Treat others as you think all people should be treated.

This means that if you have a problem with a subordinate, you should wait for a private moment to discipline the subordinate. Likewise, if your commanding officer makes a mistake in front of others, wait until later to discuss it. Your consideration will be appreciated. No one enjoys being embarrassed. Consequently, if you treat others with courtesy, you will be treated with courtesy in return. Although this practice is not difficult, the use of tact becomes challenging during conditions of stress or when giving criticism to a subordinate.

Usually, a calm, courteous, and firm approach will bring a cooperative response without creating ill feelings. Even though inexperienced leaders sometimes feel that politeness implies softness, there is no reason to be discourteous when using abrupt and/or forceful orders in emergencies.

14. Unselfishness

As an officer and a leader, you must put the comfort and advancement of others ahead of your own; particularly, you must never achieve at the expense of others.

This does not mean that you should put the needs of your subordinates ahead of the
accomplishment of the task, for the task always comes first. However, you must see that the needs of subordinates are taken care of before your own. Such a natural tendency toward unselfishness shows subordinates that you are considerate and compassionate.

Unselfish leaders avoid providing for their own comfort and personal advancement at the expense of others. Leaders should place the comfort, pleasure, and recreation of subordinates before their own. It is difficult to respect leaders who seek their own comfort over that of their subordinates or who hoard credit for achievement made possible by subordinates. True leaders place themselves last in priority and share the dangers and hardships with their subordinates.

### Importance of Leadership Traits

These fourteen leadership traits are important characteristics for a leader. If subordinates think that you are not concerned with their welfare, they will follow you unwillingly. If you treat them with care and compassion, they will be more likely to follow you anywhere, anytime, for any reason. Never take credit for something a subordinate has accomplished. Also, remember, you cannot merely act concerned; you must be concerned.

The fact that these traits interrelate cannot be ignored. One must also use discretion in adherence to these traits and qualities, for they sometimes may conflict. It may prove difficult to serve both integrity and tact at the same time. For example, in being honest and in accomplishing the task someone has his or her feelings hurt.

In order to lead others, you must be able to lead and control yourself. A wise man once said, “If one man was to conquer a thousand men in a thousand battles and another was to conquer himself, the latter of the two would be the greater.” In other words, you must first conquer yourself. Only when this is done, may you then teach others.

Everything in leadership starts with the leader. If leaders cannot judge their own character, how can they judge others? If leaders do not know themselves, how can they know others? If leaders are fearful, how can they expect those who follow them to be courageous? If leaders cannot endure, how can they expect those they lead to endure? If leaders are not dependable, how can they expect others to depend on them?

Men and women alike have adhered to these leadership traits, often at great personal sacrifice. John Goreham, a Massachusetts man, formed the first American Rangers in 1743 to help the British defeat the French in L’Acadie, or what is now Nova Scotia. He spent much of his own money and founded a great tradition with those first “ranging companies.” Men like Merritt A. Edson and Evans F. Carlson, founders of the Marine Raiders, carried this tradition into the Marine Corps in 1942. These men practiced the traits of leadership and never abandoned them. They each displayed those qualities, or traits, of leadership described in 1930 by General Lejeune:

> The young American responds quickly and readily to the exhibition of qualities of leadership on the part of his officers. Some of these qualities are industry, energy, initiative, determination, enthusiasm, firmness, kindness, justness, self-control, unselfishness, honor, and courage.

John A. Lejeune: Reminiscences of a Marine, 1930

### Conclusion
It is up to you to see that you become the kind of person that others will follow. You might try using some of the following ideas to help you to develop the traits that you will need.

For a few minutes each day, sit and contemplate what you can do to make yourself a better person. Consider in what areas you have a chance to make improvements. What are some of the routine situations that will allow you to make some progress toward being a better, more capable, or more effective cadet or cadet officer?

Voice your ideas aloud. Often if you can verbalize an idea, it makes it easier to comprehend and easier to realize. This will help you organize your thoughts and develop them to a greater degree.

Think about your ideas for improvement during the day. You can do this whether you are at school, at work, at home, or anywhere else. In addition to thinking about what you can be, think about what you already are. Concentrate on the positive side of your personality. Negative thoughts are of little or no help.

Learn to relax yourself mentally. In a situation where you are trying to accomplish a difficult task, you need to be relaxed, not tense. Likewise, work on learning the fourteen leadership traits and try to apply them in all that you do. If you do these things, you should be able to begin to develop the traits of a leader.

You have just reviewed the fourteen military leadership traits. If you are going to be a strong leader, you must develop within yourself the traits of a good leader. The process is one that takes place from within.

→