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Office of the Director

Characteristics of Good Leaders



Providing a foundation for the 2007 Army Contracting Intern Training Symposium, held March 26-29, at Louisville, KY, U.S. Army Acquisition Support Center Director Craig A. Spisak motivated interns with his presentation on what it takes to be an inspirational leader.

I'm going to talk today about characteristics of good leaders.

I'm not talking about characteristics of good leadership. Exercising good leadership is situational. Characteristics of good leaders are everlasting. As we go along our leadership journey, we realize there are characteristics we must display as good leaders. They create the foundation by which we make decisions and behave and execute behaviors that are situationally appropriate in any given leadership context.

A leadership journey is something that you are all on. Secretary Bolton says it all the time. Every single one of us in this room is a leader. The U.S. Army needs each and every one of you to be a leader in whatever context you find yourself.

Integrity: Do the Right Thing

First, there can be no greater important thing to do and exude as a leader than integrity. Integrity: do the right thing, particularly in this context, as procurement professionals. In my 20 years, I have seen and been in a lot of gray situations. Although you are relatively new to this profession, in your 12-24 months of experience in the contracting community, you have probably already had the opportunity to be in some situations that are gray.

Displaying integrity is critical to us being successful as a community. Everybody will be looking to you in your capacity, particularly as leaders, to be the person who they can turn to and ask, is this the right thing? I've always found it important to do things right. But doing the right thing is a little more difficult to do. Finding that wisdom that you will garner over time and experience is very

difficult. And you will be put in pressure-packed situations over the course of your career. I am surprised how often it happens every day to myself. So as you go along and talk to people about what it means to be a good leader, remember, if anybody asks you, first and foremost, display integrity.

Integrity, while having some specific core meanings and functions, will mean slightly different things to everybody. You will probably have the opportunity -- or misfortune for some of us -- to have those types of events that define for you what integrity is. Keep those present in your mind. They define who you are as a person.

Excellence: Raise the Bar

One of the most important things you can do as a leader, is to not only display excellence and strive for perfection, but to also expect it of those around you at every level. Raise the bar for the leaders whom you work for, raise the bar for your colleagues and raise the bar for those who work for you. Any time you as a leader allow somebody to come to you with less than a quality product, you have just lowered the standards, in effect, you have just created a "new" standard -- one that is probably not good enough. This should never be one of our goals.

Excellence should always be part of our goal because the men and women who are in theater today wearing the uniform protecting our Nation's freedom demand it from us in each and every action that we perform every day because it means something to them. It saves lives. Excellence, in the contracting arena in particular, means that we are ensuring we are putting the best quality products in the hands of Soldiers who are in harm's way.

Sometimes doing this is not easy. It's not easy to tell somebody that the product they have brought you is not good enough. It is a very unnatural act to counsel somebody about his or her performance not being good enough. It's not comfortable. And yet a good leader recognizes this as an uncomfortable and unnatural act and does it anyway. Like everything we do, there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. It's not easy to demand excellence and still be a compassionate human being. And yet I will expect that of each and every one of you. It's not easy to demand excellence and understand that people have other priorities in their lives -- like going home and picking up their children from school, or practicing community service or taking care of ill loved ones. And yet those are the types of balancing things that a good leader does every single day. One that you should recognize is a must.

I mention those other things, like commitments outside of work, because balance is a critical aspect of a good leader. Each and every one of you, as you perform your regular duties and as you continue on your leadership journey, with opportunities to perform and hold greater authority and responsibilities need to have that balance because it provides you a framework for how you can be best at what you do. The last thing we need is having somebody who is trying to do their very best but is worried about their private lives and it affects their performance.

That is one of the things I will always remind you of when you have an opportunity to see me speak. Strive for excellence, strive for balance. Demand that and raise the bar for everybody, even those who you work for. Have the integrity and personal courage to go to those who you work for when you don't think that they are performing or demanding enough and say that's not good enough. But always do so in a fashion that allows you to maintain balance in your life.

Passion and Enthusiasm: Be a Source of Inspiration

Passionate enthusiasm is the key ingredient to inspiring others. I'm sure you have had the opportunity to be exposed to a leader

who you just knew was passionate about what he or she believed in or was working on. It's infectious. It works for those who work for you and it works for those who are working around you. If you can't be inspired about the impact that you have in the daily things that you do for the Army, let me encourage you to go look at what the Army is doing because everything you do has an incredible impact on this Army and you should take it very seriously and do it with an incredible amount of pride. When people ask you what you do for a living, what do you tell them? Do you tell them, 'I'm a contracting professional.' Do you say, 'I'm in systems contracting' or 'I work in a cubicle and I do installation contracting.' What's your response to that question?

I know my response to that question. I always tell people very proudly, 'I'm a public servant. I work for the United States Army.' There's a reason I do it. I love serving the public. I believe in what we do. I know what we do impacts lives and lots of them. I wake up in the morning and look at myself in the mirror and have pride in what we do as a community. I go home at night, I look at myself in the mirror and look at my wife and I take pride in what I did that day. I do so with great passion.

When you tell people with passion and enthusiasm about what you do and what your responsibilities are, you will find it will tweak their interest. And if I can influence just a handful of you today to take that passion when you meet somebody for the first time and that inspires one or two people to be motivated toward public service, and even better, toward serving this great institution, the U.S. Army, then I will consider my talk with you a success. If I can get one or two, vicariously through what you do, I will be thrilled about what we've accomplished. Now, that's a really low goal. I've already violated the "excellence" part.

I think that with passionate enthusiasm in our every day work, we can create an incredibly powerful community. And in our private lives, we can inspire and motivate others to want to join us in this very noble service.

Character and Confidence: Walk the Talk

I had an old colleague whose favorite expression was, 'you've gotta talk the talk and walk the walk.' We just coined a new one, 'you must display what you say.' It's not only the way you say it and the way you do it, it goes beyond that. It's the what you do, the how you do it, it all rolls up. I put confidence out there because, like passion and enthusiasm, confidence is inspiring as well.

When you get around people who are extremely excited about what they're doing but nervous, don't believe in themselves, don't think they're going to be successful and you think to yourself, well, they already think they're going to fail. They're excited about trying, but they think they're going to fail. It doesn't quite have the impact on you as when you get around somebody who says, 'this is a great opportunity. I can't wait to do this. I think we're going to make an incredible impact. And oh by the way, I've thought about this. I know how we're going to be successful. Follow me.'

Displaying confidence, combined with personal character, like passion and enthusiasm, will have great motivational impact.

Selfless Service: Make a Difference

I talked about this one a little bit when I told you I was proud to be a public servant. Selfless service is also one of the Army's seven values and truly should be your own personal internal motivation. Good leaders don't do so for their personal rewards or gain. Good leaders do not rise and ascend to positions of greater authority and responsibility off the broken backs of others. They do so off the backs of others, we all do, as partners, but as you approach your responsibilities, do so with selfless service in mind. Think about why it is you're doing what you're doing. Is it to get the next promotion? It's a great

side effect of doing a good job. Is that the reason why you're doing it?

I like to remind the folks in my organization and I assure you, it gets very difficult in a staff organization, to remember the link between what they do and the Soldier in the field. Imagine yourself sitting in a staff organization very close to the Pentagon dealing with 8 or 10 different offices trying to staff a policy. And say to yourself, 'jeez, this policy's going to have impact on Soldiers.' I know a lot of folks who have trouble remembering that.

When you're staffing a document and coordinating with your colleagues, in a staff environment, the results of your efforts create a procedure or method for excellence -- an opportunity to show the way for other people to be successful. And when they are, it makes a difference to Soldiers. So don't get bored with some of your mundane tasks, because every job has them. Don't think, 'nobody will notice.' Remember, if you're in it for selfless service, you'll notice. And if you notice what that bar of excellence is, you'll remember to achieve it. And when you do, it will make a difference.

Approach your job every day with the opportunity to make a difference. I had the good fortune to hear one of the former surgeon generals, Dr. David Satcher, who said, 'When you have an opportunity to encounter people, have a goal in mind. Try to leave them better off than they were before they encountered you. Make a difference in their lives.' I realized recently that he was talking about selfless service. Don't do it for yourself. Have that kind of impact on those around you.

Personal Philosophy: Servant Leadership/People First

Those were a few characteristics of good leaders. Now I'm going to tell you my own personal philosophy. The organization I'm the director of, we have a vision and we have a motto, "People First." I didn't create People First, the director before me did. It works perfectly with my personal philosophy, which is "Servant Leadership."

As I said a few minutes ago, leaders do not ascend to positions off the broken backs of others. Typically, when people draw a career path they think of a career pyramid. They have this pyramid in mind that's very broad at the base and comes to a point at the top where you've ascended to the most senior of positions and you're looking down at all the minions who work for you.

That is not how it works. It may be how some people see it. I like to think of it as an inverted pyramid. You have reached the point where now you carry the weight of all those who work with you and all those who work for you. With that comes great responsibility. Because your role and responsibility as a leader is to define and give direction, not to say, 'You will do this or you will do that.' That's managing.

Leaders take the people who work for them or their followers and they place them on their shoulders and they carry them. They inspire them to climb the hill. They see the obstacles that those who are working with them are encountering and break down those barriers. They facilitate those around them to be better at their jobs. They foresee where problems may arise and they give guidance and consultation to those around them. They describe their experiences so that when those around them find the same problem they can navigate around it better.

Good leaders teach those folks around them how to do a good job. They don't throw people around them into the pond and say, 'Swim.' They teach them how to swim. My personal philosophy is to approach leadership as though you were working for those who work for you. If you do so, if you treat them with respect, if you display your passion and enthusiasm, if you do so in a confident manner, and you do things right and you do the right thing, people around you will see that. They will see the

strength of your character. They will want to work with you and work for you. They will enjoy working for you.

You'll find yourself getting home at 8 o'clock at night, like I do often. When I leave, I see the lights on in the building because people know there's important work to be done. And today, that's the sacrifice they are willing to make. Some of my folks who do that regularly are in this room today. I can guarantee you I am constantly worried about them burning themselves out because they forget about that balancing that we talked about earlier. Some of them brought it with them and, hopefully, I've inspired others to exhibit some of these behaviors.

If you find your own personal philosophy and it has at root some of the facets I've discussed about servant leadership, you will find you will have the opportunity to do those same things. Seek out the hard jobs and opportunities to carry those around you on your back.

Humans don't like to change. An inspiring leader said, progress is a nice word, but change is its motivator and change has its enemies. What we are learning, and it's a difficult lesson, particularly in today's Army, is that while we remain the most powerful and feared army in the world, if we rested on our laurels, we would cease to be very quickly.

To maintain that status and stature we must continually change and transform because that's what our enemies are doing. And we have to call on our leaders -- you -- to lead the way in this change because it's not comfortable to change. It's unnatural, people don't like to do it. Leaders have to recognize the value of changing and step first into that uncomfortable arena until others come with us.

Other Information

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