



# **N C O O T E S**

from AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare

## **Wise Leadership**

by

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I may not be brighter, or more clever, or better educated than those around me, but I have learned a thing or two. I have served in leadership positions continuously for more than 18 years, including Tank Platoon Leader's Gunner, Tank Commander, Tank Section Sergeant, Tank Platoon Sergeant, Tank Platoon Leader, Tank Company and Cavalry Squadron Headquarters Troop First Sergeant. I have led men into combat in the sands of Operation Desert Storm and on peace enforcement missions in the first days of Operation Joint Endeavor in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Does this make me a better or more qualified leader than my peers who have not done the same? Absolutely not! I mention it not as a comparison, but to introduce myself to the reader and to establish my qualifications as a leader. Contrary to popular belief, leaders are not born. At least I have never met one, someone who had it all figured out at a very early stage. Leaders are made, made through years of hard work, trial and error. Book smarts are a great starting place (in fact, recommended) but cannot compare with hands-on practical experience gained by inter-

action with soldiers. Leaders are made through the accumulation of knowledge and experience. And during the journey, knowledge and experience merge into wisdom.

This piece, aimed at the junior NCO and officer, is an attempt to reach out and let them know that there are no quick solutions. Just because you read the book, or you were put in a leadership position, does not end the journey; rather, it is a beginning. I guarantee our most precious resource — our soldiers — will challenge you to the limits of your abilities, and you will either learn and grow, or fail. The most difficult task you will face during your military career is to become a professional leader. You see, the heart of the matter is that the journey will not end after a 30-day field exercise, test or some other time-limiting event. The journey to become a leader is never-ending. So how can I assist you? Maybe by bestowing upon you what was entrusted to me.

First, do you have what it takes? Do you possess a truly deep sense of commitment to your profession, to your soldiers? Not the

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superficial “I want to be successful” kind. Are you prepared to suffer with them, and for them? If a grenade rolled into the midst of your soldiers, would you jump on it, or would you expect one of your soldiers to do so? If you would expect one of them to save you, you can stop reading this now. You do not possess the depth of commitment I describe, stop wasting your time and get out as soon as possible. Trust me; your soldiers know. Hell, you know the same about your leaders. Do you really think your soldiers are any less intuitive? I am talking about a commitment you feel, not ponder. This is an extreme example, but it serves to make you peer into the core of your commitment.

Are you more concerned with what the boss might say? Or are you more concerned with doing the right thing for your soldiers, your team? By your team, I mean our Army. If you are worried about what the boss might say, you are improperly motivated, selfish, excessively concerned with your own welfare. You can stop reading this now. You do not possess the depth of commitment or level of understanding to continue. It is the leader’s responsibility to shield his or her soldiers from unnecessary suffering — the key word here being “unnecessary.” Have the moral courage to stand up and suffer for them.

If you are still with me, maybe this is for you; maybe you can be the one. You understand that by doing what is right for your soldiers, your team, you are indirectly taking care of the boss. He will understand. You understand that taking the hill also requires you to figure out how to do so without losing any of your soldiers. Your soldiers are the most important things in your life and you feel that. When they hurt, you hurt. You are entrusted with their lives, an awesome responsibility you do not take lightly, nor should you.

If you do not feel the commitment, feel their pain, share their sufferings, put their needs before your own, you will never learn to identify with them. And if you never learn to identify with them, you will never learn to lead them and have them follow willingly. Oh, you could force them, but if that was your first response, you should have stopped reading long ago.

Case in point: One evening during Operation Desert Shield the unit was lucky enough to have steak on the dinner menu. After a long staff meeting in the tactical operations center, the battalion commander came out to find that someone had saved him a plate. The first thing he asked was, “Has every soldier in the battalion received a steak?” To his discomfort, the answer was no. The battalion had not been issued enough for everyone. He promptly chewed out everyone involved with saving him a steak, found a soldier that had not received one, and gave him his.

How many leaders do you know who would have done likewise? Would you? I can tell you word of his actions spread like wildfire. Within days, everyone in the unit knew. What do you think the soldiers of our unit thought of him afterwards? Soldiers will follow a leader they believe cares about them. Our commander proved he cared by his unselfish actions. We did not call him “Soldier Hard” because we liked him. But the unit knew when we crossed the border into Kuwait he would do everything in his power to take us all home again. And he did. Soldiers will do anything for a leader they believe truly cares for them.

Actions speak louder than words. What the commander did that night spoke volumes. Many times I have seen a new leader take over a unit and say many wonderful things. But it does not take long for true feelings to be displayed. Your soldiers will know the truth the moment what you said is tested. For that reason, learn the leadership principles in FM 22-100, *Military Leadership*; commit them to memory. But more importantly, embrace them, make them your own, make them the core of your being. And when you find yourself in an ethical dilemma, let them serve as your guiding light to positive and effective leadership — and thus, never fail the test.

I, like most who endeavor to become professionals, have learned more from what I have done wrong than from what I have done right. And I learn new things still. How, in such a short article, can I give you, an aspiring leader, the necessary tools? Volumes could be and have

been written about this subject. Maybe all I can hope to do is give you the tool belt — the most valuable lessons I have learned, the treasures of experience, the secret keys to your success, the foundation upon which to build.

**Teach them to win.** No one item has more potential power than that of a winning team. The sweet taste of victory is extremely addictive. Once your soldiers taste the thrill of victory, well, you get the idea. Success breeds success. Easier said than done: The key to winning is to do it as a team. An open hand hitting an object will not do as much damage as a closed fist — fingers tightly wrapped together supporting each other, power funneled into one focal point. Your soldiers are the fingers; you are the driving force. Demand they work together. Encourage their support of one another and reward them for it; discipline selfish infractions always.

**Treat them with respect.** We are all men and women first. Yes, there is a certain pecking order within the military. But just because you are the one in charge does not make you any better than anyone else, nor give you reason to act like a king. You have the benefit of your education and training. This increases the expectations of your superiors, and of your soldiers to lead them. You have heard it before: “You cannot demand respect; you have to earn it.” Be willing to do so. Treat others with the level of respect you think you should receive. You would be surprised how people will respond. Earn your soldiers’ respect through your professionalism. They will love you for it.

**Disciplinary problems? Look within!** I have never met a leader with numerous disciplinary problems whose leadership skills were not lacking. If your soldiers frequently disobey or forget your orders, are rebellious or exhibit low morale, first look within yourself. This will be one of the hardest things you do as a leader. Make an honest appraisal of yourself. Are you the problem? You have an obligation to your soldiers to eliminate every distraction to superior performance, even if it requires you to make some kind of change in your leadership approach.

If your soldiers respect your professionalism, you will have very few disciplinary problems.

**Train them.** Nowhere in this article did I ever say coddle them. Train them to survive without you. Be ruthless in training, demand improvement. But temper your expectations by their level of proficiency. They will never perform it perfectly the first time. I am not saying accept a low standard; I am saying push them to their limit. Be willing to accept that and then analyze how to teach them to do better. Again, teach them to win. If soldiers fail, usually one of two things is true: Either you failed to properly express what you wanted, or you have failed to train them. God forbid they should ever fail for lack of training.

Picture it this way: Most leaders feel they can jump 10 feet every day, even on a bad day. But your soldiers can only jump seven. What do you do? Get mad because they cannot meet the standard? Some weak leaders do. Demand they meet the standard all you like, but if you do not show them the techniques and tricks of the trade, they will never make it. I submit it is your obligation to mentor them, to teach them to jump the other three feet. It’s called *leadership*. What you should evaluate is their effort. Are they giving you an honest, 100 percent effort? If they are, you must accept seven feet and teach them the rest. One day they will make seven and a half, and then eight. Teach them to win; they will appreciate you for doing so. One day they will achieve the standard. Think of how proud they will feel on that day. And you will have achieved a new plateau as a leader.

**Hold them accountable.** Soldiers thrive on challenges. No soldier likes to be bored, have no assigned responsibilities. Put their mental abilities to work; challenge them. Make working for you interesting. Tell them what they are responsible for and then give them the authority, guidance and room to maneuver. Again, success breeds success. Soldiers who achieve in the face of challenges are proud of their accomplishments. And they should be. Proud soldiers are happy soldiers — the taste of victory. But always hold them accountable for their actions. If they fail to

do it right the first time, make them do it again. I must be held accountable for that for which I am responsible.

**Three Simple Steps.** These three simple tried and tested steps will make you not only a better leader, but also a successful one. They really are as simple as they look. But I guarantee if you use them religiously for a week, you will use them for a lifetime.

1. Assign the task and make sure it is understood.
2. Check the progress of the task to ensure what you intended is what is actually happening. If not, go back to step 1.
3. Inspect the task to ensure the standard has been met. If not, go back to step 1.

**Know Your Soldiers.** Know everything about them, not just their first names. You must know each of them individually: what motivates them, the limitations of each, their strengths and weaknesses. I guarantee you will be unable to motivate them if you do not understand them. Any soldier can be properly motivated. No two soldiers respond the same; you may have to mix and match your leadership styles. What works with one soldier may not work with another. It is your duty to help them improve their weaknesses, fine-tune their strengths and expand their limitations. It is also your duty to plan for and compensate for their weaknesses, effectively use their strengths, and employ them within the limits of their abilities.

## Conclusion

These items will give you a good start. But the value of a proficient example is priceless. Wise leadership is the most difficult to achieve. The pursuit of leadership knowledge is not enough. Practical application of the knowledge you gain is an active ingredient for which there is no substitute. Few possess the ability to blend the two into an effective leadership style. Some

old soldiers have forgotten more about leadership than most of us will ever learn.

If you want to watch the essence of “wise leadership” in action, you will have to look for an old soldier. Watch as he or she interacts with soldiers. Watch as the leadership principles set forth in FM 22-100 spring to life. I submit that not all old soldiers are wise leaders. So be cautious in your selection; some have learned more than others. If you are fortunate enough to have one in your unit, pay close attention and learn; you will be truly amazed. The lessons they will freely give you through their own example will be invaluable. You could not pay them for those lessons; you could not buy them in a bookstore. These lessons are a gift from one generation to the next.

I would never claim to have all the answers. Some may consider my list incomplete, and I would agree. I have only scratched the surface of what we could talk about. I have given you a good place to start. These ideas and principles have served me well. They could do the same for you. They are also meant to get your attention, cause you to strike up dialog with others about them and, in doing so, cause you to explore and possibly learn.

It takes years in the trenches with soldiers to gain the necessary knowledge and experience to become a wise leader. But you can get a head start. Look back through what I have written here. Using this as a guide, can you identify a wise leader in your unit? If you can, engage him or her in conversation. Offer to buy your wise leader a cup of coffee, sit down and ask him or her to explain their leadership philosophy. If you were right with your selection, the years of struggle to learn will gush forth. Absorb as many of these hard-learned lessons as you can. Then, and only then, will you be armed with the treasures of experience ahead of your time. Just think: By this time tomorrow, you could be well on your way to becoming a “wise leader” in your own right.