



### **Letters on Leadership #5: Taking Care of Your Teammates**

All leaders are held to two standards: mission accomplishment and taking care of your people. If polled, I'm confident most people would agree that accomplishing your mission is the more challenging of the two. Taking care of your people is easy. As a young officer in the Marine Corps, I certainly thought so. Accomplishing the mission was the tough part. I enjoyed taking care of my Marines. I was good at it. To me taking care of my Marines meant letting them out early on a Friday, it meant getting some "hot wets" (hot coffee and soup) brought out to the field when we were training in the cold. It was making popular decisions that helped my Marines like me. I thought this way up until my first time in a combat zone.

We were one of the first conventional units to cross the border during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is tough to adequately put into words the chaos and stress of the time. My unit had been tasked with patrolling the Kuwaiti side of the border in the days leading up to the invasion. When



everything kicked off on the night of March 19th, we had already been awake and working for close to 24 hours. We crossed in darkness. The oil fields had been set ablaze and you could barely see through all the smoke. Due to the threat of WMD's we wore full chemical suits and every time we took incoming enemy fire we had to put on our gas masks, often for hours at a time. Our advantages were speed and violence of action so there was no time to stop. No time to rest, eat, or drink. This was our first time in combat and we fully expected to run into a battalion of enemy tanks every time we crested a rise or turned a corner. The constant ebb and flow of adrenaline only added to our fatigue.

After moving for another 24 hours we were finally given the order to stop and set into a security position. I was relieved that I would finally get a chance to get some crucially needed rest and a bite to eat. I knew my Marines needed the same and the overall sense of relief was palpable. Once we moved our vehicles into position my commanding officer called me and the other Lieutenants over to his position. When I arrived the first thing he said wasn't "how are you?" or "crazy day, huh?" Instead, he looked at me and said "Mac, I need a patrol out within the next 10 minutes." I answered "yes, sir," but inside I was seething. Didn't my boss know how tired and hungry we were? Didn't he know how to take care of his Marines? I continued to rage internally at the unfairness of it all on the walk back to my platoon. However, by the time I got there I was embarrassed. I realized that taking care of his Marines was exactly what my boss was doing.

At The Program we define taking care of your people as "***making every decision with the best interests of your teammates at heart.***" My boss knew exactly how tired and hungry we were. He hadn't slept or eaten either. He knew how badly we wanted some rest and how much we would resent an order to immediately go back out. However he also knew that taking care of us had nothing to do with sleep, food, or comfort. In that situation it meant making sure no bad guys attacked us. Taking care of his Marines meant bringing us all home alive to our loved ones, and he was willing to make unpopular decisions in order to make sure he brought us home.

Making every decision with your teammates best interests at heart is rarely giving them the answer they want to hear. It involves holding your teammates accountable to the standards of your organization. It may mean taking a teammate's keys when he has been drinking, knocking



on a teammate's door to make sure she gets to an early class, or correcting a teammate when their behavior is hurting mission accomplishment. These actions may not make you more popular or better liked. You do them because you care about the wellbeing of your teammates and are willing to make unpopular decisions because they are in the best interests of your teammates.

A great organization will have a mission that is in sync with the best interests of its teammates. We stay focused on the mission first, but on our teammates always. Taking care of your teammates is making every decision, not with their wants, desires, or whims, but with their best *interests* at heart.

Attack!

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