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THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #85 -



Trust is the foundation of every relationship. Without trust, there are no relationships. Without relationships, there are no teammates. Without trust, there can be no team. Great teammates first set the example and then hold their teammates accountable to achieving that example. Therefore, accountability requires trust. For me to hold my teammates accountable to the standards of our organization, I need to trust that they will receive it well and that our relationship will not be damaged.

It takes trust for a quarterback to sit in the pocket with the rush bearing down and deliver an accurate pass. It takes trust that her teammates will back up her shot for a lacrosse player to shoot for (and hit) the top corner of the net. It takes trust for a welder to work on a live gas line when their teammate is observing everything else around them. Combat takes an inordinate amount of trust, as well. If I do not trust my teammates to do their job on the battlefield, there is no way that I can do mine at 100%.

During the initial hours of the Battle of Najaf, my platoon was situated at a traffic circle with an enormous cemetery to our front right. Most of the fighting, much of it at close quarters, was taking place in the cemetery. Although the battle began in the temperate morning, once the sun was higher in the sky, it was well over 100 degrees. We wore full combat uniforms, fought from vehicles without air conditioning, and drank hot water. Within a few hours, I'd been shot in the shoulder, and two of my Marines had been seriously wounded. In addition, we had also been awake for over 24 hours before the battle began. Fierce fighting, much of it done by my Marines, took place to my front while behind me, the innocent civilians of Najaf took cover. A two-story building loomed to my left. As far as I knew, there were no bad guys in the building, but I knew for a fact that there were no good guys there either. It made me uncomfortable having my left flank unguarded. I tasked one of my Marines, Lance Corporal Ball, to "cover that building." He was to remain focused on the building and shoot anyone before they shot us. Lance Corporal Ball was barely removed from high school, but I knew with every fiber of my being that no harm would come to us from that building, with him covering it. During the next few hours, my Marines did great things. They saved lives, fought valiantly, and accomplished missions. And I never once thought about that building.

How was I able to trust this young Marine enough to put my life and the lives of my Marines in his hands (or rifle scope, in this case)? How can we all develop this level of trust with our athletic or corporate teammates? Three ways.

First, through shared experiences. Any experience (group projects, team-building activities, social events, etc.) we share with our teammates will build trust. However, the more intense the shared experience is, the more trust is built. Further, the intensity of the experience is directly proportional to the duration that you will remember that experience and the level of trust built during it. In the Marine Corps, I made sure to join my Marines in physical training whenever I could. In the field, I slept in the same dirt and ate the same food regardless of my rank. To this day, I regularly work out with my teammates. We exercise together to get tougher but, just as importantly, to bond and build trust while attacking adversity.

The second way we build trust is through consistent behavior. It is tremendously difficult to trust a teammate when you don't know what behavior you will get. Some people behave differently and bring different amounts of effort from project to project, day to day, or even play to play. Regardless of their talent level, you can't trust this type of teammate. As leaders, it is vital that we have defined standards that reinforce our core values and that we consistently hold our people accountable to these standards. When star performers are held to different behavioral standards, trust is destroyed. In the Marine Corps, I had to ensure that I held everyone accountable to the same standards. If a standard was to be five minutes early and someone walked in late, it didn't matter whether they were an 18-year-old Private or a Master Sergeant with 25 years of experience. If you were late, you were late, and I would hold you accountable. In truth, not everyone liked this, but they always knew where they stood and could trust that I would be consistent. We all want to be well-liked, but trusting me was more important than liking me on the battlefield. The same is true for all our teammates.

The third way we build trust is through transparency. Trust is destroyed when our teammates don't know the reason behind our actions or feel we have ulterior motives. Many people's only experience with the military is from movies and television, where

everyone runs from place to place “calling” cadence, and the answer to every question is “Because I told you so.” If the answer to your people is always “because I told you so,” you are demonstrating not only poor communication but poor leadership too. Transparency starts with a clearly defined mission or desired end state. To be sure, there will come a time, e.g., 3 minutes left in a game, a crisis at work, or a firefight, when we may not have time to deliver a carefully crafted mission statement. The answer at those times may be, “Because I told you so.” However, this is why we must not wait for a crisis to develop trust. We must develop it every day (and understand that we can lose it every day too). To build enough trust with our teams to follow us in those moments of crisis, we must be transparent and explain the mission at every opportunity.

Transparency is also a crucial part of accountability. We don’t want our teammates wondering, “Did she tell me to touch the line because she doesn’t like me”? Those thoughts will destroy trust. Having clearly defined core values and black-and-white standards that reinforce those core values will provide transparency to accountability. I want my teammate to know I am telling him to touch the line because that is one of the standards we have committed to, not because of how I may feel about them.

Around 3 hours after I tasked that young Marine with covering the building, an insurgent fighter stood up on the roof armed with a rocket launcher and took aim at our vehicle. His range was close enough that there was no way he could miss. All he needed to do was pull the trigger, and I was dead, along with my Gunner, Driver, and probably 5 or 6 other Marines. This was three hours after I tasked Lance Corporal Ball with covering the building. The insurgent was only visible for a second, but before he could pull the trigger, Ball pulled his.

And saved my life.

Share experiences, behave consistently, and practice transparency.

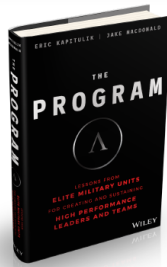


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