

On Strategic Leadership

U.S. Marine Corps (Lindsay L. Sayres)



I Marine Expeditionary Force and Multi-National Division North commanders discuss election security plan with Iraqi soldiers and Kurdish representatives in Mosul, January 2009

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Strategic leadership has many characteristics in common with leadership at lower levels, but it also has some that are distinctive. There are six that we think will be particularly relevant to strategic leaders in the future: intellectual openness, nuance, intellectual agility, integration, teamwork, and ethics. Because the scope of opinion on strategic leadership is diverse, leaders must be open to different points of view.

Intellectual openness. Because the scope of strategic leadership is so wide and the range of opinions on strategic issues is so diverse, leaders must be open to different points of view. Indeed, they should encourage subordinates, peers, and others to express their views as directly as possible—from those in the corridors of power and the public at large to allies and friends abroad. No one has a monopoly on relevant

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Marine Corps officer greets man portraying Iraqi official during leadership engagement exercise

U.S. Marine Corps (Kelsey J. Green)

experience and practical wisdom about the complex issues facing American leadership.

Nuance. The problems that occupy the inboxes of strategic leaders involve ambiguity and complexity. If they were unambiguous and simple, they would be solved at lower levels. Strategic leaders must be able to recognize and deal with this ambiguity and complexity and the shades of nuance that they present. This requires effective skills in managing cognitive dissonance, for evidence and argumentation usually send conflicting signals. Denial is *not* one of those skills. Leaders may be able to deny that they perceive cognitive dissonance, but cannot make the conflicting signals disappear by denying them. A well-developed appreciation for nuance would generally reject an either/or approach, which in itself denies ambiguity and complexity. For military leaders in particular, this means that tactics, techniques, and procedures—though important, even necessary—may not always be up to the task at hand, which leads to consideration of another quality.

Intellectual agility. Strategic leaders do not have single-issue inboxes nor do they fully control their agendas. Strategic leaders must be able to transition with little or no warning, and at times turn on a dime, from one problem to another. It is the policy equivalent of the so-called three-block war. In practicing intellectual agility, strategic leaders must be informed and guided by doctrine and past experiences but not become slaves to them. Properly understood, military doctrine is authoritative, but requires judgment in its application. Too often, professional officers remember the former but not the latter, and rigidly apply doctrine to situations that may be significantly different from those the doctrine writers envisioned.

Strategic leaders must be adaptable and able to “call an audible” when an unanticipated situation is thrust upon them, or in an anticipated crisis that differs in important ways from the planning scenario, thus rendering the “on-the-shelf” plan not fully appropriate and useful. Since “no war plan survives contact with the enemy,” strategic leaders must also be able to adapt in the middle of a war or crisis, rather than holding on stubbornly to the plan or policy they began with, even when it no longer seems to be

achieving the objectives, or is doing so at unacceptably high costs.

Integration. The problems confronting strategic leaders are rarely unidimensional. Almost by definition, strategic problems are *multidimensional*, involving military, political, economic, cultural, social, religious, and historical factors and forces that are often difficult to disentangle from each other. Thus, successfully addressing strategic problems involves several instruments of national power, sometimes all of them. Strategic leaders must master the instruments of their own departments or agencies, but must also be able to help integrate and coordinate them with those of other departments and agencies. Strategic leadership requires the skills of an orchestra conductor, not of a soloist, no matter how talented.

Teamwork. Government operations on the strategic level require teamwork. Strategic leaders must build an effective team within their own agencies that includes career officials (both civilian and military) and political appointees. The former are

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nonpartisan experts, and the latter, who also include experts, make administration policy. Strategic leaders must also build effective interagency teams to integrate and apply various instruments that the given problem demands. Increasingly in the 21st century, strategic leaders must also build effective teams with coalition and alliance partners, whose cultural backgrounds and modes of operation frequently will be greatly different from their own.

Relationships are critical in building effective teamwork on all levels. Organizations do not cooperate or integrate; people do. Building relationships takes time, and new administrations sometimes do not have that luxury because real-world concerns will suddenly intrude. Thus, forming and molding relationships must start on day one. The key to strong and effective relationships is trust. It must be built and earned; it cannot simply be declared. It must be multidirectional, not unidirectional. For trust to take hold in organizations, leaders

on all levels must be both trustworthy and trusting. Both are necessary; neither by itself is sufficient.

Ethics is always important, but especially given the challenges that the Nation confronts today. Strategic leaders must personally set and periodically recalibrate their own moral compasses. Doing so begins with one’s own moral values and principles, those inherited from family (and, for many, from religion) and nurtured in school. Professionals are guided by an ethos that defines and regulates their profession—military, public service, the law. All citizens, but especially public servants, must also incorporate national values and principles, which for Americans include those enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In an era when the world is shrinking, news is driven by a 24-hour cycle, and coalitions have become the norm, ethics also involve what the Founders called “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

Ethics must involve both ethical ends and ethical means, especially for strategic leaders who wrestle with the problems of today. Ethical ends can justify some means, but even the most ethical ends cannot justify any and all means. Leaders will be judged—by themselves and by others—not only by the goals they set, but by the means they use in trying to achieve those goals.

In every organization, regardless of size, the leaders set the tone, including the ethical tone. Within military organizations, command climate starts at the top. It is reflected in what strategic leaders say and in what they do, and those who serve in their organizations, as well as those people outside who come into contact with them, pay attention to both words and deeds. **JFQ**